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**GOD IN DIALECTIC WITH HUMAN CULTURE:
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE THEOLOGY
OF CULTURE OF JACQUES ELLUL**

Sze-chi CHAN

**Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of London, King's College**

1997

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Abstract

God in Dialectic with Human Culture:

A Critical Examination of the Theology of Culture of Jacques Ellul

This study examines the theology of culture of Jacques Ellul in his theo-cultural works ^{on} ~~of~~ law, the city, technique, and western culture.

The formal thesis of this study is that Ellul's theological program can best be appreciated in the perspective of a theology of culture. His works consist of substantial theologies of culture with normative, descriptive, and critical dimensions. Taken together, his works represent one of the best contemporary attempts at a theology of culture.

The material thesis of the study is that Ellul's theology of culture is strongly economic in character, in ^{that} ~~which~~ God's economic action is decisive for understanding and transforming human culture. With the God-man dialectic as the central paradigm, his work on law has spelt out a creation-covenant parousia time axis, while his work on the city has set an eschatological spatial horizon for human culture. Yet his understanding of God as the Wholly Other has prevented his God-man dialectic from spelling out a more christological and incarnational time axis and spatial horizon for the transformation of law and the city respectively. Moreover, his cultural analysis of technique as an autonomous spiritual power, and his theo-cultural interpretation of western culture as contradicted and abandoned by God, have meant that Ellul's God-man dialectic has failed to include technique and the modern West into the economic time axis and spatial horizon. This shows that his understanding of the God-man dialectic is essentially one of contradiction and is not sufficiently incarnational. So, although it has provided incisive criticisms on actual cultures and cultural elements, it has not been equally incisive in understanding them within the redemptive economy of God. His theology of culture harbours more negativity than positivity. The theological solution to this undesirable outcome lies in expounding a truly Trinitarian-incarnational understanding of culture.

Preface

It was ten years ago, back in 1987, when I and my wife had the unexpected chance to visit Professor Jacques Ellul personally in his hometown in Bordeaux, France. For us it was a providential happening in which God even provided us with an interpreter. It was such a memorable experience to be able to meet this very human, humble and warm person, to listen personally to his great mind. I was impressed by his emphasis on the Word of God, yet equally impressed by his sensitivity to the work of the Holy Spirit, and his optimism and hope towards the future, especially concerning my home country, China.

The visit was a crowning of ten years of engagement with his thought, for it was ten years earlier, back in 1977, when I began to read some of his works. At that time we, as members of the Christian Association of the University of Hong Kong, were challenged by a strong Marxist student movement. The Christian fellowship desperately needed some thinkers to provide intellectual guidance on how to understand the modern world. Professor Ellul's works were there ready to guide us.

Yet Ellul's legacy was for me a bit mixed. After reading a certain number of his books, there developed inside me a pessimistic and reductionistic tendency, of which I was then not aware, only later to be pointed out by a senior Christian brother in the fellowship. Therefore, when Professor Gunton suggested to me that I do my Ph.D. research on him, I just felt that this was another instance of providential guidance. Because I wanted to do research on the theology of culture, Ellul did appear to be the most promising thinker to work on. Yet I was not ready, for I would rather do research on him *after* the Ph.D., and I knew that it was not easy to take on this very prolific and diverse thinker.

After trying various approaches, the Ph.D. thesis was reduced to its present form. It is comprised of only a limited number of topics, and goes for depth rather than comprehensiveness. It was meant to be a beginning, rather than an end, to the further study of Ellul along the line of a theology of culture. From the very beginning, I have set my goal at working towards a trinitarian-incarnational understanding of culture. Therefore, my feelings about two of the chapters were mixed, namely, those on Ellul's ideas of technique and God's abandonment, for I have to show that these two ideas are precisely not grounded in the Trinity and the incarnation.

My utmost gratitude belongs to my wife, Yuk-lin, for all her love and support and perseverance throughout the years of study. Similar gratitude must also be extended to her parental family, especially to my mother-in-law, and to my elder brother. During the years, Yuk-lin also gave birth to our two lovely daughters, Chor-see and Chor-tin, from whom I derived much joy lightening the load of years of study.

My sincere and deep gratitude belongs to Professor Colin E. Gunton, my most gracious supervisor, who has extended to me utmost grace and freedom during the years of study. His sharp insights and incisive criticisms have set my thinking and research in motion. Besides, I am also thankful to Dr. Christopher Schwöbel's sharp insights during his stay ⁱⁿ at King's College.

During our stay in Britain, many Christian scholars have also extended to us many kinds of help that one normally can only dreamed ^{of} about. Although I cannot follow up many of their helpful suggestions, I am still very grateful to them. To this group belong the Right Reverend Professor T. F. Torrance, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, Professor John D. Zizioulas, Father John Macken, S.J. of Dublin, Professor Jose M. Bonino of Argentina, and my former professors and lecturers in Aberdeen. Finally, I am most indebted to Dr. Andrew Goddard, who

as a fellow researcher in the thought of Professor Ellul has extended to me his most generous help in getting many bibliographical materials related to Ellul. From all of them I learned what it means to experience grace in a Christian culture.

In the writing up stage back in Hong Kong, I am indebted to a number of Chinese Christian scholars who also extended to me various sorts of help. These include Dr. Jason Yeung of the Alliance Bible Seminary, Dr. Siu-Kwong Tang of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Dr. Kwok-ying Lau of the Chinese University, Dr. Stephen Lee of the China Graduate School of Theology and, finally, my colleagues and department heads in the Department of Religion and Philosophy of the Baptist University, especially the most kind Dr. Lauren Pfister, who also has a keen interest ⁱⁿ ~~on~~ the thought of Professor Ellul.

Apart from the contributions from my wife and the Overseas Research Students Award, I am also thankful to the King's College Overseas Theological Trust for granting me a half-scholarship. Besides, Christian brothers and sisters from the Chinese Church in the St. Martins-in-the-field in London, the Chinese Alliance Church in London, the North Point Alliance Church in Hong Kong, as well as students from the Baptist University, former fellowship members from the Christian Association of the University of Hong Kong, and many others in the Chinese Christian communities in Britain and in Hong Kong, have all extended to us countless support, both financially and in other ways, during our stay in Britain. It is to these Chinese Christian communities that the present work is dedicated.

Finally, when I come to meditate on the accomplishment of this meager work, in the light of this huge support of love, I can only marvel at the provision of God's grace. Although in the study I have expressed substantial disagreements with the late Professor Ellul, I am confident that he, in the full knowledge and

freedom he possesses now in heaven, can smile freely and agree with what I have done. In honour of him I want to use his prayer in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* to bring this study to a close.

*All the acts which I have done expressly to serve thee,
and also all the acts which I believe to be neutral and purely human,
and also all the acts which I know to be disobedience and sin,
I put in thy hands, O God, my Lord and Saviour;
take them now that they are finished;
prove them thyself to see which enter into thy work and which deserve only
judgment and death;
use, cut, trim, reset, readjust,
now that what is done is done, what I have written I have written.
It is thou that canst make a line true by taking it up into thy truth.
It is thou that canst make an action right by using it to accomplish thy
design,
which is mysterious as I write now
but bright in the eternity which thou hast revealed to me in thy Son. Amen.*

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Chapter 1) General Considerations on the Field of Theology of Culture

Before we can actually embark on an investigation of Ellul's theological works on culture, we have to investigate first the field of theology of culture in order to clarify this field. We must point out that this is just a preliminary attempt ^{at} ~~of~~ clarifying this complex field.

1.1) Motives or Concerns for a Theology of Culture and the Resulting Theological Formulations

When we come to consider the field of theology of culture, the first aspect which captures our attention is the motives or concerns lying behind such theologies. We recognize that these motives are indeed crucial in determining not only the content, but also the actual formulations of such theologies. We can recognize about five major motives for a theological reflection on the meaning of culture. However, we hasten to add that these are not the only motives that can be detected. Moreover, they are by no means mutually exclusive. Rather, we shall later see that one motive easily moves over to the others, and that two or more motives may conjoin to produce a certain theology of culture, as it will be shown in the later chapters.

1.1.1) The Ethical Motive

We come to recognize, firstly and foremostly, an ethical motive in the theological reflection on culture. The problem of how Christians should conduct their lives in a culture has never ceased to energize the imagination of Christian thinkers. Tillich certainly highlighted the significance of a theology of culture for

Christian ethics.¹ The prime example of this motive appears in H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture*², which is hailed as one of the textbooks in Christian ethics. It is certainly remarkable for this famous work with a dominant ethical motive to take such characteristically christological formulation. The more usual case is that theologies of culture arising out of an ethical motive will take formulations such as 'Christianity and culture', 'Christianity and civilization',³ 'kingdom and world',⁴ or 'church and culture'.

The formulations just listed show that the ethical motive easily moves over to correlate with some other subordinate motives in producing these formulations. Thus the more cultural-historically motivated 'Christianity and culture or civilization' formulation clearly shows a cultural-historical interest in understanding the impact of Christianity as a historical force on culture, so that ethical lessons or prescriptions may then be drawn ^{for} from the renewal or rejuvenation of a certain culture or civilization. On the other hand, the 'kingdom

¹ See Paul Tillich, "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture", tr. William Baillie Green, in James Luther Adams (ed.), *What is Religion?*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp.155-181. See also J. Heywood Thomas, "The Problem of Defining a Theology of Culture with Reference to the Theology of Paul Tillich", in R. W. A. McKinney (ed.), *Creation, Christ and Culture - Studies in Honor of T. F. Torrance*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), pp.273-287.

² H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

³ See Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization*, Parts I & II, being the Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of St. Andrews, 1947, (London: Nisbet & New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1948 & 1949).

⁴ Jacques Ellul's early work, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, tr. Olive Wyon, (New York: Seabury, 1967. First edition 1951. Original French edition published by Editions Roulet, 1948), which has been hailed as the fountainhead of his later writing, was in fact spelt out in this paradigm. This was made clear, interestingly, in comparing the English title to that of the original French edition, namely, *Présence au monde moderne: Problèmes de la civilisation post-chrétienne*. However, in spelling out Christian actions in the world, in order to make present God's Kingdom, this predominantly ethical work in fact does not provide a substantial theology of culture, but only a scattered and brief theological understanding of the 'world', and a seminal analysis of the modern world or civilization which had anticipated Ellul's later theo-cultural analysis of the modern world in terms of the all-pervasive 'technique'. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, tr. John Wilkinson (New York: A. Knopf, 1964, original French edition, 1954).

and world' formulation carries a strongly political and eschatological motive. In this formulation the 'world' obviously refers more to the cultural than the natural world.⁵

But more notable is the profound correlation of the ecclesiological motive with the ethical one, as shown in the last formulation. This is understandable, as when Christians ask the ethical question of how to conduct their Christian life in a culture, they cannot help asking it in an ecclesiological framework, with the conducting of this Christian life conceived for the church community as a whole. Barth's early essay 'Church and culture' is an important contribution to this formulation.⁶ Both the ethical and ecclesiological motives as well as the eschatological one are evident in this essay.

1.1.2) The Evangelistic and Missionary Motive

The ethical motive, important as it is, is not the only one in stimulating theological reflections on culture. In recent years, there is an ever growing stream of theological literature on the relation between gospel and culture, and on cultural communication and transformation as well. This is certainly due to the persistent missionary and evangelistic concern of the Evangelical sector of the worldwide church.⁷ For them, culture looms large as the missionary barrier to be

⁵ Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*. But also see Jacques Ellul, "'The World' in the Gospels", tr. James S. Albritton, *Katallegete: Be Reconciled*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 16-23, in which Ellul has argued for dialectics and interpenetrations of various understandings of the world.

⁶ Karl Barth, "Church and Culture", first published in 1926, in Karl Barth, *Theology and Church*, tr. Louise P. Smith, (London: SCM, 1962), pp.334-354.

⁷ See, for example, Eugene A. Nida, *Customs, Culture and Christianity*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954, and London: The Tyndale Press, 1963), David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978). However, the Evangelicals do not have monopoly in this matter. The Catholics, for one, have also expanded substantial effort in this matter. See, for example, Louis J. Luzbetak, S.V.D., *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988). Besides,

overcome in worldwide evangelistic effort. The struggle of many third world churches to root themselves in indigenous culture certainly contributes to the reflection. The problem of cross-cultural communication is especially pertinent, as Evangelicals understand evangelization mainly as the communication of the gospel message. From cross-cultural communication one easily crosses over to reflect on the cultural transformation of a certain culture under the gospel. It would not be strange if this theological reflection on culture is always formulated as 'gospel and culture', 'contextualization or indigenization (of the gospel)', or 'communication of the gospel'. Here, the basic paradigm people recourse to is nearly always Niebuhr's five types of interaction delineated in *Christ and culture*.⁸ However, it must be pointed out that in this usage, Niebuhr's five types have been adapted from the original ethical context to the evangelistic context, and 'Christ' in the original formulation is substituted by the 'gospel'. This may be traced to the ambiguities contained in Niebuhr's original formulation, which we shall examine below. Moreover, communication of the gospel readily lands the gospel into an interaction with culture which may fall into one of Niebuhr's five types.

For the moment, we must take notice of another formulation of similar missionary or evangelistic motive coming from another sector of the worldwide church. This is the 'theology of inculturation' formulated mainly by Catholic

the respected Lesslie Newbigin in recent years has produced one of the most sustained discussion on the problem of re-evangelizing western culture. See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (London: SPCK, 1989); *Truth to Tell: The Gospel and Public Truth*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches and Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991).

⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, especially pp.39-44.

thinkers.⁹ It is obvious that 'inculturation' would be a term more congenial to Catholic thinking with regard to the relation between gospel and culture. And it is also obvious what kind of theological answers these thinkers would provide for the problem of gospel and culture and the problem of establishing churches in local cultures.

1.1.3) The Theological Motive

We have indicated above that there are ambiguities in Niebuhr's formulation. One of these is that Niebuhr has not always stuck very closely to the original formulation of Christ and culture, so much so that his exposition seems to end up as a general cultural-historical exposition of the relationship between Christianity and culture, rather than one ^{within} along the dogmatic locus of Christology.¹⁰ It is partly due to this ambiguity that Evangelical thinkers can easily substitute 'gospel' for 'Christ' in their use of his five types. This ambiguity betrays a theological concern that is not adequate or rigorous enough, and the cultural-historical motive finally gets in the way in Niebuhr's exposition. Despite his conspicuous ethical concern for the Christian church, Niebuhr seems not to be concerned enough with understanding theologically the proper dogmatic relationship between Christ and culture. This has actually hindered him from drawing normative theological conclusions from his historical-theological exposition, so much so that he can only end up with a Kierkegaardian existentialism in choosing the church's right attitude towards culture.¹¹

⁹ See, for example, Alwyn Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), and Hervé Carrier, *Gospel Message and Human Cultures*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ It would be more fruitful to investigate the implication of Christology for culture along the lines traced out by Colin E Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983). A recent effort that attempts to take seriously the implication of Christology for culture is Hilary Regan and Alan J. Torrance (eds.), *Christ and Context*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

¹¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Chapter 7, pp.230-256.

This failure of Niebuhr has highlighted the need for a rigorous theological motive in theological reflections on culture. However, such rigour does not often feature in theologies of culture, as culture, rather than theology, will usually be the focus of concern. Rather, it is in dogmatic or biblical theological discussions that we sometimes find theological reflections on culture with theological rigour. This takes formulations such as 'revelation and culture', 'bible and culture' or 'God and culture'. It can be said that twentieth century theology arose when Barth embarked on such a theological critique of the role of culture in theology.¹² In this sense Barth's theological programme was continuous with that of nineteenth century Liberal Protestantism, in that they both undertook a theological critique of culture. But there was one crucial difference, namely, that while Liberal Protestantism just limited their critique to one particular culture, i.e., the Greek culture which supposedly dominated orthodoxy¹³, Barth's programme has pursued a more rigorous critique of all cultures in their role for theology.¹⁴ It was in the diastasis that Barth succeeded to posit between theology and culture that his rigorous theological motive was served and theology was again able to pursue its proper subject, namely, God's revelation, in freedom.

On the other hand, in biblical studies, the growing awareness of the intricate relationship between God's revelation and the cultures of the biblical

¹² T. F. Torrance, "Introduction", in Karl Barth, *Theology and Church*, pp. 7-54, especially pp.15-23. See also T. F. Torrance (ed.), *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology, 1910-1931*, (London: SCM, 1962), pp.208-217.

¹³ See Aldorf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vols. 1 to 7, (Boston: Robert Brothers, 1897). See especially Vol. 1.

¹⁴ In this sense we can say that Bultmann's programme is in much greater continuity with Liberal Protestantism. In his demythologization programme he limited his critique of culture to only one, namely, the antiquarian three-tiered mythological worldview of ancient people which he purported to have dominated the biblical authors. Yet he was totally stuck with the modern scientific-technological worldview which he believed to be unnegotiable for modern man, and never seemed to be aware of the need to criticize it. See Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 1-44.

environment has prompted many reflections on the significance of cultures, especially the Hebraic culture, for revelation; the status and nature of the bible; and the conduct of biblical hermeneutics.¹⁵ Besides the rigorous theological-hermeneutical motive, other motives also prompt such reflections, for these reflections are recognized to be important in missionary situations. People would naturally hope that this would throw light on and even serve as a model of how to indigenize and communicate the gospel message in different ethnic cultures.

1.1.4) The Cultural-historical and Anthropological Motive vis-a-vis the Theological Motive

If the theological motive represents one end of the motivational spectrum, then the cultural-historical motive represents the other. Usually, although culture is the focus of theological reflections, the concern lies elsewhere and is not synonymous with this focus. The concern usually lies with the theological entity which is being brought into interaction with 'culture'. Thus in formulations such as 'church and culture', 'kingdom and world', 'gospel and culture', 'theology and culture' etc. it would easily be alleged that the concern lies with the church, the kingdom, the gospel and theology respectively.

But there is a subtlety here, and this is where the cultural-historical motive comes in. This subtlety has to do with the particular nature of culture as a comprehensive category of human existence. Culture as the comprehensive living context of a certain thinker may command the most deep-seated concern from him

¹⁵ E.P.Sanders is certainly one of those biblical scholars who has highlighted the importance of cultural background for the proper understanding of major biblical figures such as Jesus and Paul. See E.P.Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), and *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, (London: SCM, 1977).

On the other hand, Martin Hengel, with his massive *Judaism and Hellenism*, (London: SCM, 1974), has certainly gone a long way in highlighting the cultural background of the New Testament.

or her.¹⁶ The strong feeling of nationalism and the love of one's ethnic group certainly do not help but aggravate the problem. A thinker may covertly or overtly place his or her ultimate concern on the well-being of his or her own ethnic group and national culture.¹⁷ Thus despite the explicit theological entity in the formulation, this may actually become subordinated to the cultural-historical and anthropological concern. Thus even when a thinker speaks of 'gospel and culture' he may just end up envisaging the gospel as a means to foster the well-being of a national culture or an ethnic group. Once this kind of means-end thinking encroaches on the gospel and culture formulation it becomes inevitable that one side will be subordinated to the interest of the other.

Yet there can be another subtlety which is opposite to the previous one. For as a comprehensive category, a person's interest and alleged motive in culture

¹⁶ This is the main concern of many cultural-historical reflections on the West by British scholars before and after the Second World War. The role of the Christian religion in western civilization features strongly in such reflections, which are variously formulated as 'Christianity and history', 'Christianity and society', 'Christianity and civilization' and 'Christianity and religions'. See, for example, Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1949), _____, *Writings on Christianity and History*, ed. C.T. McIntire, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), Christopher Dawson, *Progress and Religion: An Historical Enquiry*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1929), _____, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, (New York: AMS Press, 1979. First published 1950), T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1939), S. L. Greenslade, *The Church and the Social Order: A Historical Sketch*, (London: SCM, 1948), M. B. Reckitt (ed.), *Prospect for Christendom: Essays in Catholic Social Reconstruction*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), Arnold J. Toynbee, *Christianity among the Religions of the World*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1956).

Moreover, in this thesis we shall use the term 'culture' and 'civilization' interchangeably, although we are aware of the differences in opinions concerning whether to differentiate the usage of the two terms in various disciplines.

¹⁷ The Chinese experience is certainly illustrative of this. In the Anti-Christian Movement of the 1920's, nearly all the Chinese Christian responses to the movement argue for the utilitarian value of Christianity for Chinese national salvation. See Wing-hung Lam, *Chinese Theology in Construction*, (Hong Kong: Tien Dao, 1980), pp. 176-220.

may turn out to be an interest in the truly ultimate dimension of human existence it points to, namely, the theological dimension. In this case even if the theological formulation seems to suggest a predominantly cultural motive, say, in Augustine's *City of God*¹⁸, the exposition may turn out to be a truly theological one.

The above elaboration hopes to point out that there is no clear cut formulation associated with a cultural-anthropological motive, nor is there any formulation that can surely be clear from it. And it usually depends on closer material examination to determine whether the cultural-anthropological motive is dominant.

1.1.5) The Religious Motive

But this is certainly not the case with the religious motive. This motive is prominently shown in the 'religion and culture or civilization' formulation.¹⁹ In such formulation, religion is perceived as vital to the well-being of culture and it is by restoring or renewing religion that culture is also restored or renewed. In fact, religion is envisaged as a cultural category in itself, indeed as the most essential cultural category. Therefore, the religious motive is in itself a subsidiary cultural motive and it is easy to cross from the subsidiary to the main concern. The thinker may start with a concern for religion and this merges into a general concern for culture, or he or she in a deep concern for culture develops a religious concern as its crucial or ultimate component.

1.1.6) Theological Comments on the Motives

Our brief survey hopes to set out the subtleties of the motives behind

¹⁸ Augustine, *The City of God*, tr. Marcus Dods, (New York: The Modern Library, 1950).

¹⁹ Tillich is certainly the prime example of thinkers harbouring this motive. See Tillich, "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture". Besides, some of the works in the 'Christianity and civilization/culture' formulation may also be seen in the light of this motive. See footnote 16.

theological reflections on culture. This is a seldom discussed yet crucially important aspect in understanding the field of theology of culture. One must ask whether this aspect of the field has been theologically reflected upon or not, and what a truly theological response to the all important problem of motives should be. Does a theological response imply that the theological motive must be dominant over or even exclude others? Is the cultural motive always an anathema to Christians? Should Christians be concerned with Christianity, or religion, or culture, or the kingdom?

Our survey above has shown that the different motives are closely related in many formulations. They do not come in pure forms. Obviously, the problem associated with Niebuhr's book has at least shown that a truly Christian ethical motive cannot help requiring a concomitant rigorous theological motive to undergird it. So do evangelistic, ecclesiological, missionary motives, lest these all degenerate into utilitarian penultimate concerns. As ends in themselves that have to be achieved at all costs, such motives will also lose sight of their own more ultimate theological concern in the glory of God and the well-being of man. On the other hand, the ethical and evangelistic motives do go together as joint motives for Christian action.

But how can the theological motive tally with the cultural and religious motives? Is not culture an anathema word for theology proper? Is not Barth's diastasis of theology and culture instrumental in pursuing a truly theological motive? Are not theology and revelation anti-religion? And is not a purely cultural motive impossible even under the term 'theology of culture'? Therefore, is not the theological motive paramount even in a theology of culture?

There is certainly theological truth in disallowing a purely cultural motive to become the ultimate concern for a person. Yet it is obvious that a purely theological motive for a theology of culture is equally impossible. For a theology

of culture to be truly a theology of culture a cultural motive must be allowed. Yet there must be some correlation between the theological and the cultural motives in order to prevent ~~it~~ ^{the latter} from becoming the ultimate concern, as truly the 'other task of theology'²⁰ which Barth has rejected as being impossible in any theology, certainly including a theology of culture. Only by being 'included in the one theme of theology'²¹ can the cultural and religious motives be legitimized and allowed their full freedom of expression in a theology of culture. But what could the form and content of this correlation be?

Inquiries would not go far in discovering that there must be one ultimate concern that can allow the theological motive to take precedence over other motives, while allowing these other motives to be included into its orbit. This concern must overcome the utilitarian dualism which reduces one motive to the other, and pierce through the superficial individuality of various motives, establishing the ultimate theological unity beneath them. The answer lies in going back to the original christological concern of Niebuhr's formulation. In reality, it is only in a truly christological motive that we find both the cultural and theological motives conjoining together. Only in a concern for the realization of the lordship of Christ in our culture, and only in understanding the true intent of the incarnation, can we ground the legitimacy of a cultural motive in a theology of culture. For if Christ Himself was not afraid of taking on human cultures, who are we not to take them as seriously as he did? And it is only in Christ, in the ultimate concern for His Lordship, in the ultimate obedience to His incarnation, that we can take culture as seriously as its true nature and status in Christ

²⁰ Karl Barth & Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology*. Introduction by John Baillie and translated by Peter Fraenkel, (London: Geoffrey Bles, The Centenary Press, 1946), pp. 71, 123.

²¹ Ibid. p.123.

warrants.²² Moreover, it is again in the concern for the Lordship of Christ, when we take culture thus seriously, that we take it with a truly theological orientation, and that this orientation is a truly christocentric one. Moreover, the ethical and evangelistic motives must also be correlated with this theological orientation into a christocentric motive for Christian action.

1.2) Dimensions of a Theology of Culture

Robert J. Palma, in his well-known monograph on Barth's theology of culture, has distinguished three different types of theology of culture, namely, the descriptive or dogmatic, the critical or analytic, and the normative or constructive theology of culture.²³ We recognize that these distinctions are helpful in clarifying the field of theology of culture. Yet we would also point out that these are philosophical rather than theological distinctions. They distinguish theologies of culture not according to their inner theological logic or dynamic, but according to ^{the} usual philosophical distinction between the descriptive and the normative, with the critical dimension coming in between them. We would, therefore, characterize these three distinctions as delineating three different dimensions of a theology of culture, rather than delineating three different types of theologies of culture. For we recognize that in actuality it would be difficult to separate these three dimensions from each other, because they by nature necessarily merge into one another. For how can a critical or analytic theology of culture be without its dogmatic dimension on which to base its critique? And how can a dogmatic theology of culture be without normative or constructive implications? And after

²² Robert J. Palma, *Karl Barth's Theology of Culture: The Freedom of Culture for the Praise of God*, (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick Publications, 1983), p.74, in which it is stated that "In Barth's christological concentration, in which his theological method comes to such clear definition, we saw how he was freed to take simultaneously culture both less seriously but also more seriously."

²³ Ibid. pp.2ff.

a critical or analytical theological appraisal of culture one would naturally expect normative or constructive theological suggestions from the thinker. If a thinker is consistent then the three dimensions would form a coherent whole. Though the three dimensions may be distinguished they do not constitute three separate types of theologies of culture by themselves. Therefore, we would go on to clarify the different types of theology of culture in the next section.

Moreover, according to ^{the} theological logic or dynamic^{of revelation}, especially according to the actual economic action of God towards culture, an important dimension of reality comes into play in theologies of culture. This is the dimension of time. Moreover, this is not just a physical concept of time in terms of precise measurements of years and days and seconds, nor a secular one in terms of centuries of development and progress, but one in terms of God's actual dealing with man in a christocentric creation-^{incarnation}~~covenant~~-parousia axis. In this christocentric time axis, what we should understand is neither just some timeless divine ideal of culture, nor just some general divine critique of our cultures. What we should understand is what God has originally intended human culture to be in the creation, what human culture actually has been after the Fall, what human culture should be as exemplified by Christ and being followed in the church, what human culture has been and will be after Christ's salvation and in his coming kingdom. In these theologically actualistic understandings, it is quite arbitrary to distinguish the descriptive from the critical and normative dimensions.

Thus it is better to consider the distinctions as philosophical tools to analyze a Christian thinker's theology of culture, though we think it better to incorporate them into the christocentric time axis for analytical use. If we just take them to analyze the works of a Christian thinker, we find that he or she may not be consistent in his or her elaborations of the different dimensions. Or he or she may not be consciously making an effort to reveal the deeper unity regarding such elaborations. The latter may be the case even with Barth, in that his

theological critique of culture in his pursuit of proper theology does lead many to think that theologically he is against culture, yet his high view of culture in his more normative piece of work in "Church and culture"²⁴ and his more carefree but revealing comment on the music of Mozart²⁵ do seem to catch many people by surprise. Yet this should not be so once his theological infrastructure giving rise to these different elaborations is understood.

But certainly, a thinker may put more emphasis on one or two dimensions, thus affecting the overall profile of his or her theology of culture. So this distinction of different dimensions can be very helpful in understanding the profile of the theology of culture of a certain thinker, as Palma has applied this so profitably to Barth.²⁶

Moreover, as we have discussed the motives behind theologies of culture and pointed out their significance, we can well imagine that different motives and their resulting formulations certainly affect the overall shapes of the theologies of culture according to these dimensions. Thus it would not be unnatural that an ethical or evangelistic motive would result in an emphasis on the normative dimension. And theological, cultural and religious motives would more probably issue in more descriptive and critical theologies of culture.

1.3) Types of Theologies of Culture according to their Actual Method and Content

²⁴ Barth, "Church and Culture".

²⁵ Karl Barth, *W. A. Mozart*, tr. Clarence K. Pott, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986, original German edition 1956).

²⁶ Yet Palma has stopped short of tracing back the foundation of the overall profile of Barth's theology of culture according to these dimensions to his theological infrastructure. See Palma, *Karl Barth's Theology of Culture*, pp.2-5.

We have tried to clarify the field of theology of culture according to the motives behind and the dimensions involved. Now we want to consider another aspect of the field that is still largely unexplored, namely, how to classify various theologies of culture according to their actual method and content.

We recognize that the different types of method and content do not just arise from emphases on different dimensions or motives. Certainly an exclusive concern with the descriptive dimension due to, say, a theological motive, would produce a theology of culture very different in its method and content from one produced out of an emphasis on the normative dimension due to an evangelistic motive. However, even with a similar dimensional emphasis out of similar motive, the theologies of culture produced may still be markedly different.

In our opinion, these differences are due to very basic differences in approaches and assumptions Christian thinkers bring to their tasks of theology of culture. Since theology of culture starts as a boundary subject between dogmatic theology and other cultural disciplines, it carries the dual requirements of being theological as well as cultural (in the primary sense of speaking on culture). Such dual requirements cause a lot of tension for theologies of culture. It is understandable that theologians would carry different assumptions to this task due to these dual requirements. One such assumption has to do with the relation between theology of culture and dogmatic theology. Another has to do with the relation between theology of culture and other disciplines involved in cultural analysis. For the moment we shall concern ourselves with the first problem and the type of theology of culture it gives rise.

1.3.1) Dogmatic Theology as Theology of Culture

The subtle relation theology of culture has with dogmatic theology leads us to consider the first possible type of theology of culture, namely, dogmatic theology understood as theology of culture in its own right.

When Robert J. Palma wrote on Barth's theology of culture, he chose a strange path. Rather than examining in detail Barth's direct and more substantial writing on the theme of culture, Palma, after briefly examining Barth's understanding of the formal concept and the formal relation in the light of Niebuhr's five types²⁷, chose to emphasize Barth's way of doing theology, and this he has taken as Barth's input to theology of culture. The key premise to his position is that Barth's way of doing theology indeed exemplifies for us Barth's theological understanding of culture. In other words, Barth's understanding of culture is derived from his lifelong struggle with this particular cultural domain, namely, the domain of theology.²⁸ This, contends Palma, shows us what Barth thought culture as a whole should be.

While we recognize that theology is in a sense a cultural discipline, and the theological task a cultural task, we wonder whether such methodology really does justice to theology of culture materially as a category distinct from dogmatic theology. For one thing, all theologies can be viewed tautologically as theologies of culture in this sense. For all theologies are formally cultural endeavour in cultural context and, given the significance of theology in the life of theologians, a theologian's theology certainly serves as an example of his understanding of culture.

Yet to derive a theologian's theology of culture in this way is to do something the theologian has not explicitly intended to do. And it is questionable and ironic that such derivation can be deemed as the theologian's theology of culture without the theologian himself or herself being aware of and involved in it. And to the non-theological public it would certainly be incomprehensible that

²⁷ Ibid., pp.6-7.

²⁸ Ibid., pp.2-5.

a dogmatic theology can be a theology of culture without explicitly speaking on culture! But more importantly, to derive a theology of culture in this way poses another problem, namely, a theologian may harbour a particularly high view of theology that is not generalizable, thus his view on other cultural domains or culture as a whole will not be the same as his view on theology. Therefore, it is imperative for a theologian to expound explicitly his view on culture as a whole and particular cultural domains individually.

In point of fact, the person deriving a theology of culture from the cultural example provided by a theologian's dogmatic theology is really acting as a theologian of culture on the theologian's behalf. In view of this, we think it better to speak of the implicit cultural potential of a dogmatic theology, rather than speaking of the theology of culture of its author.

Moreover, we deem it useful to differentiate different understandings of the term 'theology of culture' so that we may better define it vis-a-vis other types of theologies. Certainly, if we understand all theologies to have a cultural character, that they are indeed human pursuits of the truths of God's revelation in cultural contexts, then all theologies are theologies of culture. Or we describe all theologies as cultural, in the sense that they always arise out of, and still belong cultural-historically to, certain cultures. It is in this understanding that we speak of theology as a discipline of culture, and attach theological significance to the cultural example it provides.

However, this does not mean that such theology would give direct pronouncements on culture in general or on cultural domains in particular, providing us with an explicit theology of culture in a second sense of speaking explicitly on culture. There are certainly differences between a theology which can be a theological example to culture yet not speaking directly of it, and a theology which speaks directly on culture or addresses culture directly. Just as all

theologies can be good or bad Christian examples of art, not many of them do speak of art directly.

Therefore, if a theologian does not speak directly on culture or its domains, it is illegitimate to speak of his theology as theology of culture in the second sense, though it may be an important one in the first sense, as an important cultural endeavour and carrying implicit cultural potential. Certainly, this does not mean that Palma's exposition of Barth, though misconstrued, is worthless. For by construing Barth's dogmatic theology and its method as his theology of culture and its corresponding method, he has shown precisely the rich cultural potential of his theology. In fact, we would like to argue that all theologies of culture must be worked out from the implicit cultural potential of dogmatic theology, so much so that they can be thought of as an extension or application of dogmatic theology to the field of culture.

Here, we touch on a further problem of the relation between dogmatic theology and the theology of culture. We ask: If ^{the} theology of culture must depend on the cultural potential of dogmatic theology, does it imply that it is just a voluntary subsidiary endeavour for dogmatic theologians? Are there any theological reasons for dogmatic theologians to embark on explicit theologies of culture, or do they just depend on the theologians' goodwill? Moreover, how closely related to each other are the two kinds of theologies? Can dogmatic theology be completely free of a theology of culture, even though the latter must depend on the former?

This problem cannot be adequately answered unless we consider the material content of all theologies, namely, that of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In the light of revelation, God became man in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This incarnation did not happen out of the blue but in the concrete man Jesus in his concrete cultural-historical context. This means that God's revelation

is a revelation in culture. This character gives dogmatic theology a dual task in relation to culture.

Firstly, in order that dogmatic theology can really speak of revelation, i.e., can really be theological, it must strive to distinguish revelation from its cultural background, for revelation was so incarnated in this background that noises from the cultural background may easily be confused as messages of revelation. Dogmatic theology must also strive to keep other cultural noises, especially those from theologians' own cultural backgrounds, from parading as some kinds of general or natural revelation. Otherwise such cultural noises would replace or take precedence over the revelation of Jesus Christ, and dominate its theological method and content. This means that dogmatic theology must always strive against culture's influence to prevent itself from degenerating into an inherently cultural theology.²⁹ This is the negative task dogmatic theology must perform against culture. In this struggle of dogmatic theology to understand God's revelation free from cultural influence, it would be much better if it can focus intentionally and speak more explicitly on culture in the light of revelation. This would help to clarify the relation between revelation and culture, and so help to prevent theology from degenerating into an inherently cultural theology. This should give dogmatic theology a strong theological motive to articulate a theology of culture. An explicit theology of culture would enable us to better assess whether the dogmatic theology behind it has been free from cultural theology or not. Thus an explicit theology of culture is an important feedback for dogmatic theology. Therefore, dogmatic theology's wrestling with the problem of culture would not invalidate but rather strengthen the need for a theology of culture.

²⁹ Here we use the term cultural theology in parallel with and partly replacing the term natural theology. As natural theology takes its method and content from a nature supposed to be a revelatory source from God independent of Christ, similarly cultural theology takes its method and content of theology from human culture supposed to be another revelatory source from God apart from Christ.

Besides, there is another consideration why dogmatic theology should speak more explicitly on culture. This has to do with the negative effect a struggle with cultural theology usually has. For in a struggle with cultural theology, culture's detrimental effect on the understanding and articulation of God's revelation is very much in focus, so much so that an exclusively negative theological evaluation of culture may result. To speak explicitly on culture is one way for the dogmatic theologian to redress this imbalance, by putting culture in the light of the total context of God's economy. It may be partly due to Barth's failure to spell out substantially such an explicit theology of culture, that he is misunderstood as being too negative on culture because of his famous and relentless struggle against an inherently cultural theology. It is to Palma's credit that he is able to balance the picture by pointing to Barth's more positive and direct pronouncements on culture³⁰.

Secondly, the fact that revelation happened in culture means that theology's wrestling with culture cannot be a purely negative task. For God's revelation in culture means that it is also a revelation on culture. It has a lot to say on human culture and its impact on man in his humanity and his relationship with God. Thus dogmatic theology does not only need to strive against culture's influence, it also has a mission to pronounce God's revelation on culture. In short, dogmatic theology, in order to be theological, must also be cultural in the sense of addressing it. A dogmatic theology without a corresponding theology of culture is not theologically complete. To complete this theological task a dogmatic

³⁰ In fact Palma's conclusion is that Barth is too positive in his explicit theological understanding of culture. But Palma did not discuss how Barth reconciled this positive understanding of culture with his relentless effort to drive out cultural theology. Ibid.

In fact, Barth has already made some very positive pronouncements on culture in the light of his doctrine of the Word of God as early as the 1930s. Barth, "Church and Culture". Yet, his later disowning of this essay, together with the others, was due to his renewed effort to struggle with the problem of a subtle natural theology propounded by Brunner. In fact, the essay should be seen together with his later and more positive pronouncements on culture and humanity after this struggle was over. See Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, tr. John N. Thomas and Thomas Wieser, (London: Collins, 1961).

theology must try to spell out its theology of culture. This is the positive theological reason we must give for dogmatic theologians to embark on explicit theologies of culture. It has its theological basis in revelation's incarnational and so incultural intention. This theological basis demands a legitimate cultural motive within the orbit of an ultimately theological motive. And in this one act of formulating an explicit theology of culture the theological and the cultural motive are indeed one.

In this perspective, even dogmatic theology's negative wrestling against cultural influence has a positive function. It is only through this wrestling that dogmatic theology can be free from cultural theology and pursue its real subject, namely, God in His revelation in Jesus Christ, so that it can speak positively of God's revelation on culture. For if dogmatic theology cannot be free from cultural noises, then its pronouncements on culture would be reduced to circular self-pronouncements of culture in the guise of 'theology'. In order for truly theological pronouncements on culture to be achieved, theology of culture needs to take its rise from a dogmatic theology that is in constant wrestling against an inherently cultural theology. Thus in its requirement to be truly incultural a theology of culture must first be truly theological and be informed by dogmatic theology. It is in this wrestling of dogmatic theology when revelation truly rises above culture, that light from revelation is invariably shed on culture. That is why we can say that dogmatic theology, if it is really serious in pursuing God's revelation free from cultural influence, must necessarily carry implicit cultural potential.

What is more, there is a case that theology of culture can be the cultural as well as theological form which a dogmatic theology takes to articulate God's revelation in a certain cultural milieu, especially one in which there is great cultural change and consciousness. The example of Tillich to take theology of culture as his form of systematic theology is well known. To the extent that

dogmatic theology is a cultural endeavour and has to take cultural form of exposition, there is no apriori reason to forbid dogmatic theological exposition ~~from~~ taking the form of a theology of culture. For God's revelation has happened in human history and culture and it is certainly a legitimate way to expound it by focussing on its impact and pronouncement on this history and culture.

In conclusion, though we have drawn a distinction between dogmatic theology which may just serve as a theological example for culture and a theology of culture which speaks explicitly of God's revelation on culture, we recognize that they are in a very intimate relationship of interdependence. Certainly a theology of culture cannot be without its dogmatic infrastructure, nor is it to dogmatic theology's advantage that it does not spell out an explicit theology of culture, both for its struggle against an inherently cultural theology and for its mission to pronounce God's revelation to peoples in their cultures.

1.3.2) Formal Theologies of Culture

In the last section we have pinpointed the difference between dogmatic theology and theology of culture, and argued for the need of an explicit theology of culture. We have also elucidated the close relationship of interdependence between them. Now we have to consider different types of explicit theologies of culture according to their method and content. In dealing with these explicit theologies of culture, the tension of the dual requirements to be both theological and cultural (in the second sense of addressing the culture) always comes to the fore. Because of its boundary position, there is a need for theology of culture to be comprehensible both to theologians and non-theologians alike. This causes theologians of culture to strive at elucidating culture in continuity both with dogmatic theology and with other disciplines.

Firstly, in order to be relevant to the cultural situation, theologians of culture strive to address concrete problems in culture, i.e., to be cultural. Thus

the critical and the normative dimensions are never far from it. This strong drive towards cultural relevancy may arise from various motives, be they evangelistic, missionary, ethical, theological, ^{or} religious as well as cultural-anthropological. This struggle to be really in touch with and at the service for actual cultures provides a strong impetus for theology of culture to be in continuity with other disciplines involved in understanding culture.

Secondly, besides the impetus to be in continuity with cultural disciplines, there is the other impetus for theology of culture to stay faithful to revelation, that is, to remain truly theological. To an extent this impetus requires theology of culture to transcend other understandings of culture provided by cultural disciplines. Thus these two impetuses combine to require theology of culture to be continuous with as well as discontinuous from other disciplines.

The obvious point for a theology of culture to be in touch with other disciplines is the formal concept 'culture'. This also seems to be the obvious point to start a theology of culture. Thus when examining theologies of culture a student will find important differences at this point. The first difference hinges on the use of this formal term 'culture' (or civilization). Most theologies of culture, especially those formulated by allowing the formal concept to interact with some theological or religious categories, e.g., 'religion and culture', base their discussion on the formal concept.³¹ Surely, there may be a theological redefinition or reformulation of the formal concept either before or after the theological discussion.³² However, there exist other theologies of culture where

³¹ Even Niebuhr has simply used the anthropological definition at the outset. See Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, pp.29-39.

³² Therefore, Tillich is seen to locate the theological essence of culture in term of the category of religion. Tillich, *What is Religion?*, ed. James Luther Adams, tr. William Baillie Green, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp.59-62. But Barth has started his discussion on culture right away with a theological redefinition of culture in terms of the Word of God. Barth,

the formal term almost never appears. By this difference we may broadly distinguish two types of theology of culture according to their contents, namely, formal theology of culture basing its exposition on the formal concept of culture, and material theology of culture which may not even mention the formal term at all.

A further division can be made according to another basic difference in theological approaches to the theology of culture. This has to do with whether theologians are striving at an essential or economic understanding of the formal concept 'culture'. By an essential understanding we mean one which tries to set out an essence for the concept culture and which can be applied to all cultures and to all spheres of culture. By an economic understanding we mean one which is achieved through putting culture in the realms of God's economic actions in the world.

In the tradition opened up by Tillich, who has done much to popularize the idea of a theology of culture, it seems quite obvious to begin a theology of culture by defining 'culture' essentially in terms of its theological essence.³³ Even Barth in his "Church and Culture" started with an essential dogmatic understanding of culture of his own.³⁴ This does not mean that one does not have concrete cultures or their various domains in mind when one embarks on such definition. But it does mean that one will try to arrive at or start with a general, an essential understanding of culture, which one may then apply to concrete cultures. From such applications one extends this essential understanding, producing critiques and interpretations of actual cultures and their various

"Church and Culture", pp.337-339.

³³ Tillich, *What is Religion?*, pp. 59-62.

³⁴ Karl Barth, "Church and Culture", pp.337-338.

domains. Normative suggestions for cultural actions may then be drawn for Christians and for all people.

We must ask whether such^a formal theology of culture can be truly and adequately theological. Firstly, restricting the theological exposition to the formal concept has also restricted its theological adequacy. As theological content is channelled through the essential definition of the formal concept, the amount of this theological content is obviously restricted, unless there is an ongoing theological redefinition and enrichment of the formal concept. Moreover, the essential definitions which theologians try to supply to this formal concept represent philosophical-theological abstractions. Such abstractions may or may not be in touch with God's concrete economic actions on cultures, so much so that such economic actions of God on cultures may be completely lost sight of. Such theologies will then become speculative and idealistic. This is especially so if natural theology is adopted as the methodology. For in this method God's economy in salvation history is marginalized or even rejected as the source of theological truths. In this light it is certainly doubtful that the famous 'religion and culture' formulation should ever be viewed as a theological formulation of culture, for in no way is it directly related to the God of Jesus Christ and His economy in Christ. This formulation should be more appropriately classified as a philosophy of religion formulation. The resulting philosophy of culture is not a Christian but a purely religious one, though it may be useful for Christian theology.

On the other hand, we must also ask whether such a formal theology of culture can be truly and adequately cultural. Firstly, the formal concept also restricts its adequacy for speaking on the reality of culture. As the discourse basically revolves around this formal concept, the theological exposition is limited to culture as a totality, an essential unity, or a general category. Not much is said of the actual domains of culture in such formal exposition. Secondly, the essential

definition provided by such formal theology of culture further aggravates the problem, for while allowing a concern for the totality and unity of culture, it remains to be seen whether such essential definitions can really interpret actual cultures and their various domains in their concrete historicity and particularity.³⁵

There may be a preliminary problem of whether such theologies of culture can really be in continuity with other cultural disciplines, for the essential definitions they supply to the formal concept may be too discontinuous with more 'neutral', phenomenological definitions supplied by disciplines such as anthropology. In fact, this discontinuity between such definitions and other definitions of culture may cause formal theologies of culture difficulties in interpreting actual cultures. In the first place, since an essential definition of culture is highly interpretative, it would be doubtful whether its interpretations of concrete instances of culture would tally with the facts and not become an alien imposition of interpretations. To avoid such imposition these essential definitions of culture may be defined so generally that they would fit any instances of culture, which in effect means losing touch with actual cultures. Or such essential definitions of culture may dwell in their own worlds of discourse without really engaging with the concrete realities of cultures. Or else such formal theologies of culture may be highly selective in choosing the instances of culture to interpret.³⁶ In short, such theologies of culture may find themselves not genuinely relevant to actual cultures. In these cases a neutral phenomenological definition

³⁵ In this vein, Niebuhr's celebrated 'Christ transforming culture' axiom also suffers from the generality of the formal category. Invoked without further elaborations, this axiom can become hollow and non-specific as to what transformations, and of what cultural domains and ethos, are meant. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, pp.190-229.

³⁶ See Heywood Thomas' comment on Tillich's selective use of instances of culture, particularly expressionism, to support his religious philosophy of culture. Heywood Thomas, "The Problem of Defining a Theology of Culture with Reference to the Theology of Paul Tillich", p.282.

of culture may be a better choice, for it at least allows concrete instances of culture to be considered before theological interpretations are extended to them.

In summary, such formal theology may be neither adequately theological nor cultural. Rather, the interposition of a formal concept tends to make such formal theologies of culture both very formal and philosophical. It is formal, because the exposition can only give us a theological understanding of the formal concept. No matter how much this understanding is applied to criticize and interpret actual cultures, it may only result in an endless repetition of the formal understanding. It is philosophical because the formal concept forces the concrete historical realities of cultures to be treated in abstract as a general timeless category. We recognize that the essential definition of the formal concept may initially be ^{spelt out} ~~attempted~~ to render the theology of culture comprehensible to non-theologians. Yet depending on the level of abstraction, the essential definitions and the ensuing formal theologies may be so highly philosophical and abstract, that it may be less than comprehensible for the average Christian, who is certainly more acquainted with the language and imagery of God's concrete economy in history. It is not even certain that non-Christians may find them readily comprehensible. Thus any purported gain in philosophical comprehensibility and correlation may be more than cancelled by this loss in theological comprehensibility.

Moreover, the philosophical character of such formal theologies of culture may render them too ideal, both in their essential definition and in its critique and interpretation of actual cultures. Again it is a case of losing touch with actual cultures. Using an essential understanding of culture which is abstracted from the economic actions of God on culture, such formal theologies usually fail to deal realistically ^{with} the situation of man's Fall and God's judgement on and redemption of this Fallen order. Almost invariably such formal theologies resort to the creation as the only realm to abstract their essential understandings. That is why

they tend to emphasize more the positive character of culture while neglecting its dark side.³⁷

1.4) Attempts to Overcome Problems of Formal Theologies of Culture

Thus we have seen that formal theologies of culture are fraught with problems arising from the tension of the dual requirements. It would not be strange to find various attempts to overcome them. We would now examine some of the attempts within the confines of a formal theology of culture.

We find, most notably, the essay by Barth on 'Church and Culture'. This essay is remarkable in that it starts with one of the most theological redefinitions of the term 'culture'.³⁸ However, though the ensuing exposition revolves around this formal term, the theological understanding of this concept is progressively enriched by being subjected to various realms of God's economy. But it seems that this improvement in theological adequacy is achieved at the expense of cultural adequacy. The essential definition is obviously too theological to be comprehended by non-theologians. There is the problem of the continuity of this theological definition with other definitions of culture. It may be argued that Barth's main interest was to draw out the normative dimension of such theological understanding of culture for the church. Yet it may still be asked whether the normative dimension was not reached too soon before Barth has provided a substantial critique of actual church culture. This certainly has to do with the lingering idealism inherent in Barth's essential definition of culture. This idealism, in our opinion, is what made Barth fail to draw out the critical

³⁷ This is the severest criticism we want to extend to Barth's essential definition of culture in his "Church and Culture".

³⁸ Ibid. pp.337-338.

dimensions from the various economic realms.³⁹ Thus the idealistic essential definition still limits the theological adequacy Barth would otherwise have achieved through bringing in various realms of God's economy. Neither has such idealism been very helpful for his exposition to be culturally relevant.

Barth's attempt has been quite unusual, as most other attempts do not start from such a vigorous theological redefinition of culture. Rather, it is customary for thinkers to shy away from essential theological redefinitions of the formal term 'culture' to avoid discontinuity with definitions provided by other disciplines. Many formal theologies of culture would start with 'neutral', phenomenological definitions of culture similar to⁴⁰ those provided by anthropologists. Then theology is brought to interact with these phenomenological understandings to provide theological comments or justifications. This is the case with both Niebuhr and Jenkins.⁴¹

Such attempts have at least the merit of avoiding the idealistic tendency associated with an essential theological definition of culture. Both Jenkins and Niebuhr succeed in pointing out in their expositions some negative theological

³⁹ It may be argued that Barth's understanding of culture here is, by virtue of its reference to the Word of God, sufficiently christological to have integrated both the No and Yes of God towards culture, and it is due to the strong understanding of God's grace that God's Yes on culture comes through all the loci of God's economy. But the fact still remains that he has failed to point out the possibility and actuality of culture's corruptions in the light of God's economy. Thus it may still be asked whether this Yes has been reached too soon without first dealing explicitly with God's No. Barth, "Church and Culture", pp.341-349. Even Palma has criticized Barth's insufficient regard for the problem of evil in his 'theology of culture'. Yet Palma still failed to point out the theological reason behind this deficiency. He has particularly failed to explain this deficiency in terms of Barth's way of doing 'theology of culture'. See Palma, *Karl Barth's Theology of Culture*, pp.82-83.

⁴⁰ We use the word 'similar' because 'culture' is usually redefined every time a new author comes to discuss it.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. Daniel Jenkins, "Culture", in Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM, 1969), pp. 83-86.

criticisms ^{of} ~~on~~ culture. Niebuhr has further succeeded in explicating the subtle difference of various ethical positions in their evaluations of culture. In this sense they have achieved better theological adequacy than essential definitions can do.

Though both expositions are substantially enriched in theological understanding due to more rigorous theological scrutiny, one with biblical theology (Jenkins) and the other historical theology (Niebuhr), both expositions have still stuck to the exposition of the formal concept. This has limited their cultural adequacy. They are still restricted to expounding the formal totality of culture rather than more material discussions of culture's various domains, though we must add that such extended discussions are not the stated purpose of either exposition.

This lingering formalism is still too much a problem, not only for cultural but theological adequacy. The problem with Niebuhr's exposition is a double one, for there are in fact two formal definitions. His definition of Christ⁴² is not a christological exposition of Christ's person and work in God's economy, but a moral philosophical elaboration of Christ's virtues, which even the ensuing historical-theological investigations cannot easily modify. Moreover, even this definition of Christ was not applied to criticize the five historical theological positions, so that at the end Niebuhr could not arrive at a normative theological conclusion on the relation between Christ and culture.⁴³

Jenkins' exposition is an improvement of Niebuhr's five types. By pointing out the five types' dynamic nature of changing into one another, he has edged closer to a more historically and economically oriented theological understanding

⁴² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, pp.11-29.

⁴³ Ibid., Chapter 7, pp.230-256.

of culture.⁴⁴ Yet the biblical theological exposition is not carried to its logical conclusion to provide a full economic understanding of God's dealing with human culture throughout history. Rather, it is still expounded to provide an essential understanding of the theological ambiguity of culture in the eyes of God.

Moreover, in both expositions the supposed neutrality of definitions of culture provided by other disciplines is more assumed than theologically scrutinized. Therefore, though we see in Jenkins' and Niebuhr's expositions a way out of essential definition's idealism, the restriction of the expositions to the formal term still cannot land them ~~onto~~^{into} the full economy of God's action on human culture.

1.5) Christian Philosophies of Culture

We shall leave the discussion of the type of theology of culture arising from an economic understanding of culture later. For the moment we shall discuss another type of theology of culture which concentrates much more on the normative dimension ~~out of~~^{due to} an ethical, apologetic or evangelistic motive. Certainly we recognize that such motives are never far away from the theological motive. This is a type which attempts to supply more material content to the formal theologies of culture. In a sense it is also another effort to overcome the difficulties of formal theologies of culture. It should be characterized more appropriately as philosophy, though a Christian one with theological roots with extensive use of the Scripture as philosophical source. Thus we would call it a Christian philosophy of culture, though by 'Christian' we primarily mean that it is formally propounded by a Christian thinker. Whether such philosophy can be materially understood as 'Christian' is a problem to be dealt with later. It may also be characterized as a fundamental theology of culture, if 'fundamental

⁴⁴ Jenkins, "Culture".

theology' is understood in the sense Catholic seminarians used it.⁴⁵

This type of theology of culture arises when a Christian thinker wants to address the general public on the excellence of the gospel, or when he wants to instruct the Christian community how to construct a way of life that is fully Christian. Therefore, such work is strongly normative. A Christian thinker would utilize the Scripture as philosophical texts and, with his knowledge of dogmatic theology, distill 'Christian' principles and worldview to construct a 'Christian' philosophy of culture. Such a 'Christian' philosophy would provide a normative cultural foundation for Christian ethical action, or act as an apologetic or evangelistic demonstration of the cultural truthfulness, superiority and applicability of the gospel. Brunner's famous Gifford Lectures on "Christianity and Civilization" is probably the best example of this type.⁴⁶ And there has recently been a significant attempt to spell out various aspects of a comprehensive Christian worldview.⁴⁷ Thus many monographs on particular spheres of culture entitled as, say, 'Christian view on ...' belong to this type. In this vein, T. F. Torrance's effort in drawing a parallel between theological epistemology and scientific epistemology can also be seen as an attempt in this direction. What he is trying to get at is a 'Christian'⁴⁸ philosophy of knowledge for scientific culture

⁴⁵ "Fundamental Theology", in Karl Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1975), pp.546-551.

⁴⁶ Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization*.

⁴⁷ See the series of studies produced by the Centre for Advanced Christian Studies published by Zondervan Pub. House, edited by Arthur F. Holmes. The first of the series is Arthur F. Holmes' *Contours of a Worldview*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983).

⁴⁸ This may not be a qualifier Torrance would use to qualify the epistemological principles he is pushing for. But we coin this qualifier because his epistemology fits not only formally but to some extent materially what we are describing as Christian philosophy, namely, his epistemology has theological root and extensive use of dogmatic theology as its philosophical source.

And it must be pointed out that his theological epistemology is deeply economic and Trinitarian in character. See C. Baxter Kruger, "The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God in the

to which both theology and science can subscribe. He hopes that this would gain back for theology (and so for the Christian gospel) its autonomy and freedom from alien epistemological dictation drawn from other cultural disciplines. He may also hope that this would guide science in its pursuit, so that science would never find itself in conflict with theology again, but in harmonious collaboration with theology would freely and genuinely pursue the one whole truth of God's creation.⁴⁹ In the same vein, even the widely adopted 'Christ transforms culture' formula taken from Niebuhr's five types sounds very much like a Christian moral philosophy of cultural transformation.

1.5.1) Merits of Christian Philosophies of Culture

Certainly, such philosophies would provide us with far richer pictures of what culture and its various domains should be than formal theologies of culture. They would enter into extensive dialogues with other cultural disciplines in the critique of actual cultures and its various domains. Moreover, by bringing theology and biblical messages to impinge on various domains of culture, there is a substantial enrichment in theological content. More importantly, this rich theological content will enrich the cultural content through its substantial cultural critique. All these show the real possibility and advantage of leaving behind the formal concept and entering into material discussions. Both theological as well as cultural adequacies are enhanced.

Moreover, such philosophies may also enter into dialogue with the material contents of actual cultures without forcing idealistic essential interpretations on them. This, however, does not mean that they cannot arrive at

Theology of T. F. Torrance: Sharing in the Son's Communion with the Father in the Spirit", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1990, Vol. 43, pp.366-389.

⁴⁹ T.F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, (London: Oxford University Press 1969).

some essential, ideal theological understanding of culture at the end of their exposition, as Brunner has done.⁵⁰ Thus both for individual domains and for the total reality of culture they would be able to provide a Christian philosophy with a strong normative dimension.

1.5.2) Problems of Christian Philosophies of Culture

1.5.2.1) Theological Problems and the Need for an Economic Theology of Culture

Yet in a sense Christian philosophies of culture are a continuation of the formal theologies of culture exemplified by Niebuhr and Jenkins. Therefore they show more clearly the problems of formal theologies of culture. Without actually propounding a neutral phenomenological definition of culture, they take cultural phenomena for granted and pass theological comments on them. For an average Christian philosophy of culture, though it surpasses formal theology of culture in going into specific domains of culture, the theological content it tries to bring to bear on this cultural critique is almost always not in the form of an economic theology. It is nearly always couched in philosophical terms. Although this is formally a 'Christian' philosophy, whether it is materially a 'Christian' one is questionable. In fact, we must point out that once God's concrete historical revelation is translated into abstract philosophical terms, it cannot properly be called theology.

This is not to deny that such Christian philosophy of culture can have significant value in demonstrating the excellence of the gospel and fostering cultural changes. Yet we want to argue that such Christian philosophy of culture must take its rise from the actual economy of God in history in Christ, so that Christian discussions of culture do not fail in their primary mission of

⁵⁰ Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization*.

pronouncing God's actual dealing with human cultures in history. This is the crucial link to prevent Christian discussions of culture from becoming completely ideological. Therefore, although not propounding essential theological definitions of culture, Christian philosophies of culture nevertheless treat the revelation of God in His economy as timeless and general truths for the foundation of culture. Such truths run the risk of becoming abstract and idealistic, rendering such philosophies more like cultural ideologies than theologies. God becomes more like a philosophical assumption of their worldviews, than the living God Whom theology should strive to speak of in terms of His economy. Christ becomes a dispenser of cultural ideals, rather than the Lord to whom all cultural ideals should be judged. These Christian philosophies of culture focus more on the elaboration of worldviews than on devotion to the person of Christ as the One True Lord of all cultures.

To be sure, such philosophies usually have concrete target cultures which they want to address. And their criticisms of such cultures are not idealistic. Yet they resort to addressing specific cultures through the elaboration of general truths. It can be said that such philosophies have taken a more material approach to culture; yet theologically the approach is still in common with formal theology of culture, namely, essential abstraction out of the historical revelation of God in His economy.

No one would doubt that the revelation of God in His economy contains universal truths which are foundational for human culture, and theologians surely see explicating these as part of their responsibility.⁵¹ Yet it is essential to explicate these universal truths in the concrete economic context of God's revelation on and dealing with actual human cultures. Otherwise such truths will completely lose their theological anchor and appear as abstract and idealistic. A

⁵¹ Ibid., part I, p.v.

character of such philosophies is that they treat the Bible more like philosophical texts than the historical witnesses to the revelation of God in Christ. One serious effect is that such philosophies do not take seriously the context of the Fall. But more seriously, they do not seem to be christologically determined, unless the authors are prepared to go one step further, namely, to abstract Christ out of his economic context, to transform Him into some abstract metaphysical principle. In this connection such philosophies of culture have had a very bad reciprocal effect on the way of doing dogmatic theology. Thus we see that Tillich has interpreted Christ through his particular ontology into a metaphysical figure or doctrine.⁵² A more fruitful approach would be to embark on an actual philosophical-theological critique of culture and offer a philosophical-theological solution drawn directly from God's revelation in his economy in Christ.⁵³

We may summarize that the theological problem of Christian philosophy of culture lies in its detachment from actual theology. However, to overcome this detachment by adapting theology to the needs of this philosophy of culture is even worse. This renders it rather suspect to qualify such philosophies of culture as

⁵² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63), vol. 2, pp.136-159.

⁵³ For two notable examples of this approach, see: Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation - An Essay towards a Trinitarian Theology*, (England: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1985); and Carver T. Yu, *Being and Relation - A Theological Critique of Western Dualism and Individualism*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press 1987). Both works embark on a philosophical-theological critique of Western culture, especially on the Enlightenment legacy (and its philosophical roots). While the former work concentrates on its epistemological aspect, the latter takes on its ontological assumption. Moreover, both works try to point out a path based on an understanding of God's economy. While the former work proposed a way out through a Trinitarian theology, the latter worked out an ontological suggestion based on an Old Testament understanding of history (Yu, *ibid.*, Chapter 6). There is a certain discrepancy in the latter work in that, while the initial identification of the problem of post-Enlightenment culture is in the erosion of the 'personal' (Yu, *ibid.*, Chapter 2), the ontological suggestion is not in the direction of a Trinitarian understanding of personhood. Thus it may still be asked whether the latter work has taken God's economy in Christ seriously.

‘Christian’⁵⁴. Barth certainly would not have used the qualifier in this way. Not only is the qualifier too lofty for him to use even in dogmatic theology, not to say in any other human and cultural endeavours⁵⁵, but he pointed out that the use of the qualifier may dangerously short-circuit the problems contained in human cultural endeavours thus qualified.⁵⁶ ‘Christian’ philosophy of culture is in no exception one of such endeavours.

1.5.2.2) *Cultural Character of ‘Christian’ Philosophies*

While we may not agree that the qualifier is to be shunned even as a formal and cultural one (and can it be shunned if non-Christians want to describe our works formally as such?), we still have to face the problem pinpointed by Barth. The problem which may be thus short-circuited is concerned with the extent understandings from other cultural disciplines are used in ‘Christian’ philosophies of culture. To qualify such philosophies or worldviews as ‘Christian’ may obscure the fact that they are indeed very cultural. For no ‘Christian’ philosophies or worldviews of culture can be spelt out with sole reference to the Bible, without integrating large amounts of information and understandings provided by actual cultures or cultural disciplines. Indeed, such philosophies or worldviews usually arise from and aim at certain cultures, which also are the sources from which they draw large amounts of cultural understandings and inspirations.

⁵⁴ We must stress that while here it is we who coin the qualifier for this type of ‘theology’ of culture, we are in no way novel in this use. In fact our use is just faithfully reflecting what many thinkers conceive of their works, when they name them ‘Christian view on ...’ etc.

⁵⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translation edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957-69), vol. I/1, p.xi. See also Palma, *Karl Barth’s Theology of Culture*, p.88, endnote no. 35.

⁵⁶ Karl Barth, “The Christian’s Place in Society”, in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, tr. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), pp.272-327, especially pp.276-277.

However, it is the relation between theological truths and this body of cultural understandings which is the least clarified problem in such 'Christian' philosophies or worldviews of culture. This is probably the reason why Barth rejected (the programme of) a Christian worldview. To avoid the problem Barth has insisted that the Doctrine of Creation should not be confused with worldviews.⁵⁷ It is perfectly all right for dogmatic theology to take such a negative stand in order to rise above cultural worldviews, but with respect to the theology of culture it amounts to avoiding itself being culturally relevant because of the danger of an inherently cultural theology. With all kinds of worldviews around this does not appear to be the most sensible thing to do, for Christians cannot just hold a purely dogmatic understanding of the creation without spelling out its implications for their worldviews, though they should always beware of the cultural and theological relativity of even their own 'Christian' (in a formal and cultural sense) version of worldviews guided by the Doctrine of Creation.

In conclusion, we may say that 'Christian' philosophies of culture represent an advance over formal theologies of culture, in taking more seriously the complicated reality of actual cultures. This is the reason why they are richer, integrating more motives, more dimensions and more theological truths in their expositions. Yet their theological method is still too philosophical, so much so that it causes an over-abstraction of theological truths, diminishing the theological adequacy in the endeavour. On the other hand, the philosophical methods do not clarify the relationship between theological truths and cultural understandings, so much so that such philosophies or worldviews appear too cultural to be accepted by dogmatic theologians. The solution is certainly not to avoid them, given the need for theology of culture to be cultural, but to search for a better theological methodology to clarify this relationship.

⁵⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/1, section 42, pp.341-344.

1.6) Ellul's Theology of Culture in the Context of Other Theologies of Culture

It is high time to consider the fourth type of theology of culture, namely, economic theology of culture. We consider this type of theology of culture to be based on a sounder theological methodology which can do more justice to God's revelation on cultures in His economy, and to concrete cultures in their actualities. Yet since cases of this type of culture are so rare, it seems better if we can first expound ^{an} ~~some~~ actual example of this type of theology of culture, and pass comments on it along the way. Moreover, we have to look into the details of Ellul's theology of culture. These two tasks will become one, as Ellul's theology of culture is probably the best example of this type of theology of culture we find in the contemporary scene. Thus it seems the best strategy to start our investigation of his theological works on culture, so that we can in fact delineate the formal features of this type of theology of culture along the way, pointing out its differences from other types of theology of culture. We shall also evaluate its theological and cultural adequacies according to its particular form, content and method.

Chapter 2) God's Grace in Dialectic with Human Culture

- Ellul's Theological Foundation of Law ¹

and Cultural Institutions

2.1) Introductory Observations

The Second World War was a traumatic experience for mankind. Just as the First World War shattered many people's optimistic belief in human progress, thereby shattering the foundation of pre-war western culture, and spurring two great theological giants, Barth and Tillich, to devote their lives to theology in the post-war period², the Second World War has also spurred a number of brilliant thinkers to take the war as their point of departure in doing theology.³ Jacques Ellul was certainly not the least among them. His theological programme, coupled with a parallel sociological programme, continued for half a century, and has been finding attention and echoes around the world.

When we begin to consider Ellul's theological programme for post-war culture, the first work we have to consider is his *The Theological Foundation of*

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, tr. Marguerite Wieser (New York: Seabury, 1969, first published 1960). The book was originally published in French by Editions Delachaux & Niestle S.A., Neuchatel and Paris, in 1946, under the Title *Le Fondement Theologique du Droit*. Arnold T. Ehrhardt, in reviewing this work and others, has discussed the translation of the French 'droit' into 'law'. See his "Christianity and Law", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 15 (Sept. 1962), pp.305-310.

² See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 111-117; and John P. Newport, *Paul Tillich*, (Waco, Texas: Word, 1984), pp.25-29.

³ See, for example, Helmut Thielicke, *Christ and the Meaning of Life*, tr. John W. Doberstein (London: James Clarke, 1962), and *Man in God's World*, tr. John W. Doberstein (London: James Clarke, 1967).

Law.⁴ This is a seminal work of great importance, not primarily as a work of dogmatic theology⁵, nor as a juridic 'tour de force'⁶ by a lawyer, but also as a foundational theology of culture, for in our opinion it lays the theological foundation not only of law, but of culture at large.⁷ Although the work has attracted quite a lot of attention among theologians, philosophers and legal experts⁸, yet its importance for the theology of culture has not yet been fully expounded and appreciated. In this chapter we shall examine this work, to see what basic theological understanding of culture Ellul has reached here, so that in the following chapters we can see how his later works have continued or differed from this seminal understanding.

Before we embark on an analysis of this seminal work, let us first make some preliminary observations.

⁴ Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law*. See footnote 1.

⁵ Barth, in discussing the concept of the covenant, has listed it in the bibliography. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translation edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957-69), vol. IV/1, p.25. Busch has also mentioned that Barth used it in seminars. See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, (London: SCM, 1976, original German edition 1975), p.388.

⁶ Ellsworth Kneal, "Book Review: *Le Fondement Theologique du Droit*", *Jurist*, vol. 30, no. 3 (July 1970), pp.400-402, quoted in Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, tr. George W. Schreiner, (New York: Seabury, 1977), the back cover.

⁷ Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, p.114, "*I prefer the idea of a transpersonal law which proposes the idea of civilization as the aim of law*". Here and afterwards in this chapter all the page numbers and quotations in *italic*-form in the main text and in the footnotes refer to this work of Ellul.

⁸ Barth used it. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, p.25; Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, p.388. Pannenberg commented on it. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Ethics*, tr. Keith Crim, (London: Search Press, 1981), pp.36-38. Schüller has studied it in conjunction with the 'rechtlehre' of Barth and Eric Wolf. See Bruno Schüller, S.J., *Die Herrschaft Christi und das weltliche Recht: Die christologische Rechtsbegründung in der neueren protestantischen Theologie*, (Rome: Päpstlichen Gregorianische Universität, *Analecta Gregoriana*, vol. 128, 1963). Dengerink has covered it in his substantial survey, "The Idea of Justice in Christian Perspective," *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 39, no. 1, (1976), pp. 1-59.

2.1.1) Ellul's Cultural-historical Concern

As we can see, the book was written in 1946, just after the Second World War.⁹ The work belongs firmly to the immediate post-war period, in which the war was still a traumatic memory, and its consequences in all areas of the global society were still keenly felt. Its effects and repercussions have not yet been superseded by some other significant historical events, say, the Cuban Crisis. Ellul's concern in this period was to ground civilization in a new foundation (p.35). Indeed what he wanted to do was to ground civilization in a rigorous theological foundation. It is in this deep theologically motivated cultural concern that Ellul took up law as a domain of civilization or culture to discuss (p.9 & p.32). Naturally, in this concern for culture, we would expect Ellul to take on those domains which were particularly important for the culture at that time. Law, especially natural law, was conceived at that time as very important in checking another Nazi tragedy. Thus it seems natural that Ellul took on this domain of culture.

2.1.2) Ellul's Own Profession

Moreover, we also notice quickly that Ellul was himself trained as a lawyer, before he turned to the study of the history of institutions, and from that basis went on to operate as a historian as well as a sociologist¹⁰, besides his constant endeavour as a Christian theologian and ethicist. This provides a personal reason for his choice of the topic. The significance of this professional

⁹ Around this time Ellul wrote some articles criticizing the legal foundation for the Nuremberg trial. This can be seen as the historical occasion for his critique of natural law. See Jacques Ellul, "Ça y est", *Réforme*, whole no. 82 (12 Oct. 1946), pp. 1 & 7; and Ellul, "Note sur le proces de Nuremberg", *Verbum Caro*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Aug. 1947), pp. 97-112. Both articles are listed in Joyce Main Hanks, *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, (London and Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press, 1984), p.7 & p.9 respectively.

¹⁰ Hanks, *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, pp. xi-xiii.

training is immediately obvious when we examine the work.

Firstly, Ellul is capable of bridging juridical and theological analysis and discussion. Such a statement like *"judgment-justice-law is normative because it is an analogy of the action of God"* (p.50) can best be appreciated from a juridical perspective. Because of his juridical background he is able to distinguish between philosophical and juridical theories of law. Thus he is able to set up a theological foundation of law that is at the same time juridically sound.

Secondly, Ellul's competence in the legal field enables him to adduce facts from legal history in his theological discussion. This approach has in time become so characteristic of Ellul that there is no need to elaborate it too much, namely, that in his theological discussion there is always a confrontation of two types of facts, namely, theological facts and cultural facts. Or we say that this is in essence a confrontation of divine and human facts. Or to put it more precisely: in his work there is always a dialectic going on between facts of divine action in history and facts of human culture and history. In the following we shall see more of this dialectic.

2.1.3) The Particular Nature of Law as a Cultural Domain

- Its Place among Other Cultural Institutions

Lastly, the theological foundation of law is for Ellul also a theological foundation of culture because of the particular nature of law as a cultural domain. We can see that this is so not only because Ellul is a lawyer but because he is also a cultural historian of law and other cultural institutions. Indeed, he is an expert in the history of European institutions. As early as 1936 his doctoral dissertation was a study of *mancipium*, a Roman institution that allowed a father

to sell his son.¹¹ And from 1955 onwards he published his five volumes of *Histoire des institutions*, which serve as textbooks for law students in France and have gone into successive editions well into the 1990 s. They treat the history of organized activities in society in general (including political, economic, legal, ecclesiastical institutions, and social institutions like the family).¹²

Therefore, Ellul is well aware of the significance of law for culture, especially for western culture. By its nature law is concerned with order, and therefore is the normative cultural institution to order all other institutions in a culture or civilization. As Ellul has shown elsewhere, he considers law to play a special cultural function as the institution which organizes universal experience of time, space and relation (p.119).¹³ Law formulates a certain human cultural order, thus it is the nomic agent for the governing of other cultural domains in human activity. A determination of the nature of law would inevitably determine the nature of this human cultural order. Therefore, this work of Ellul on the theological foundation of law can be appreciated as his theological reflection on the significance of institutions (p.139), which has paved the way for his later cultural-historical study of them in his *Histoire des institutions*.

This cultural significance is especially true for natural law which poses itself as a universal foundation of culture for both Christians and non-Christians. Natural law poses itself as divine order manifested in natural order (either subjectively, in the natural reason and conscience of human beings, or objectively

¹¹ Jacques Ellul, *Etude sur l'évolution et la nature juridique du Mancipium*, (Bordeaux: Delmas, 1936), listed in Hanks, *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, p.4.

¹² Jacques Ellul, *Histoire des institutions*, 5 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, first edition, 1956-1962, 10th edition, 1989).

¹³ Jacques Ellul, "L'Irréductibilité du droit à une théologie de l'histoire", *Archivio di Filosofia* (Padua), theme issue on "Riverlazione e Storia," no. 2 (1971), pp. 51-69.

in the creation, to be comprehended by natural reason). Therefore, to order a culture in terms of natural law would ground the culture in nature and, since this nature is purported to be ordered by God, natural law will effectively provide a bridge between divine order and human order. Therefore, this work has a foundational significance for Ellul's theology of culture. In trying to reappraise the theological foundation of law in the light of revelation, Ellul has in fact spelt out a theological foundation of culture based solely on revelation rather than on a divine nature.

2.2) Introducing the Content

2.2.1) Introductory Cultural-historical Observations

With these observations firmly in the background, we shall try to understand this seminal work of Ellul. The fact that this was written as a contribution to the discussion of the post-war culture is not very distinctive. Many thinkers (say, Huxley, Orwell) were also trying to do so. What is particular is that Ellul has thoroughly based his effort on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and on the indissoluble union between man and revelation (*p.134*). Rather than trying to establish law on some universal foundation common to both Christians and non-Christians beyond revelation, he instead goes on to take issue with such an endeavour. He starts his inquiry with a critique of natural law, reaching an understanding of human law which would completely correspond to divine law, not in the form of natural law, but in accordance with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Ellul begins his exposition as a jurist, with a concise description of the facts of natural law in the *Preliminary Chapter (pp.17-36)* of this work. Thus he is situating the facts of natural law firmly within human cultural history as well as setting out one of the most fundamental distinctions he is going to use in dealing

with the problem of law, namely, that it is the fact of law as it has existed in cultural history that he is going to deal with, rather than with particular theorization about this fact. Thus he pointed out that natural law as a fact was a stage in the history of the development of law, a stage between the transition from divine law to secular law of the state (pp. 18-20). He further pointed out that the theories of natural law only appeared after the historical fact of natural law was evident (p.19). In this clarification he prepared the stage for his confrontation between revelation and natural law, not as a confrontation between theories, but primarily as a confrontation between divine facts and human cultural facts (Chapter II, pp.60-74).

2.2.2) Divine Law Substituting for Human Law

After these clarifications of the facts of natural law, Ellul goes on in *Chapter I* (pp.37-59) to set out the facts of divine revelation which are relevant to a confrontation with law as human cultural fact. He expounded three revelational facts, namely, divine justice or righteousness¹⁴, law (and rights)¹⁵, and covenant both in the Old Testament and the New Testament witnesses to revelation. What is remarkable is that during his exposition, a confrontation of the divine revelational facts with their corresponding human cultural counterparts becomes evident. In fact, it is only through this confrontation with their human counterparts, that the divine facts are revealed as what they are. God's characteristic action is not to throw down alien facts, but to take up on facts of various domains of human culture, and by election, judgement and yet final

¹⁴ See the translator's note in p.37, "The French word *justice* is used for divine and human justice. It has been translated here by "righteousness" when it refers to God, as the RSV texts do, and by "justice" when it refers to man." See also the discussion in the book review by Ehrhardt, "Christianity and Law".

¹⁵ See again Ehrhardt, "Christianity and Law", which makes clear that Ellul's concept of 'law' (in French 'droit') also includes 'rights'.

endorsement and authentication, to make these domains a form of his action. Certainly such remarkable dialectic can only be accomplished in the incarnation of Christ. Yet for Ellul, in the very process God maintains His transcendence. Thus God chose human justice as an expression of His divine righteousness, human law (and rights) as an expression of His law, and human covenant as an analogy of His everlasting covenant with Israel. We shall consider these in more detail as the ontological foundations God's grace has given to law.

2.2.3) Natural Law Demythologized of its Divine Pretensions and Judged as Human Law

With the facts of natural law and divine law sufficiently expounded, especially with an understanding of how divine law in its revelation has already taken on human law and judged and transformed it, Ellul is ready in *Chapter II* to confront the problem of natural law, and to dismantle natural law theories aiming at buttressing its claims. This chapter is not a repetition of the introductory chapter. Rather, it is a detailed point by point refutation of natural law theories. Here Ellul takes on the concepts of man, of justice and of the law of God propounded by such theories. The point by point refutations are not just superficial confrontations with revelational facts he expounds in Chapter I, but a more profound dismantling of the deeper theological assumptions of these concepts, a refutation of these assumptions by further light from revelation concerning creation, God, man, Christ, redemption and the eschaton. The result is a complete demythologization of natural law, showing that it is no more than a mythologized human cultural invention.

After summing up his refutations and drawing out the obvious conclusion from them that "*natural law does not provide any meeting ground for Christians and non-Christians*" (p.69), Ellul turns his attention back to the fact of natural law. After dismantling the false claims of natural law theories, Ellul is able to

point out the true theological significance of natural law as an event in history. It is the phenomenon of this historical event of natural law that raises the theological question of law (p.73). Neither a religious law nor a technical law will be able to raise this theological question (p.72).

2.2.4) Founding Human Law in Divine Foundations

When natural law is understood as purely human cultural invention of a certain period, raising the theological question of law rather than answering it, a true relation between human laws and divine law must be found. This is what Ellul tries to do in *Chapter III*. From now on he is concentrating on human law which can answer responsibly to divine law. He first analyses the constitutive elements of human law from the biblical perspective, basing his analysis "*on the creation and the covenant*" (p.75). Thus he identifies three constitutive ontological elements of institutions (e.g. marriage, pp.76ff), human rights (pp.79ff) and practical justice (pp.85ff) for law, which are the remnants of the original creation, or derivatives of human nature in the creation under the Fall. Then Ellul, however, goes on to expound the relation between eschatology and human law. The significance of this relation becomes clear when Ellul states that "*human law cannot be interpreted apart from the covenant and the parousia*" (p.93). It is "*in its relationship to the last judgement, to eschatology*" (p.94) that human law has its aim and conclusion. Therefore, after this exposition, Ellul finally comes to expound the purposes of human law, firstly in relation to its content, secondly in relation to its '*meaning (in French, signification)*'¹⁶. The purposes of human law are defined both with respect to the constitutive ontological elements of law, and with respect to the contexts of law. Thus with

¹⁶ The original French word 'signification' seems to convey more the role of law as sign than its English equivalent 'meaning'. See Ellul, *Le Fondement Théologique du Droit*, pp.89ff (equivalent to Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, pp.114ff).

reference to the three elements of law, namely, institutions, human rights and justice, the corresponding purposes to achieve are order, concrete freedoms and judgement. And in relation to the three contexts of law, namely, creation, covenant and parousia, the corresponding purposes of human law are the preservation of human life, the establishment of man as the covenantal partner, and a sign to the parousia. Here the eschaton in fact constrains human law to strive towards the original purposes intended by the original created order as revealed by the institutions, namely, to serve man (p.106) and his salvation (p.107). Thus human law in its answering responsibly to divine law in fact carries a highly complex teleological structure.

2.2.5) Relation between Human Law and Other Institutions in the Light of the Divine Foundations

Having expounded the relation of human law to divine law (and to revelation), in *Chapter IV* Ellul finally expounds the relation between law and two important institutions, namely, the state and the church. He subordinates the state decisively under law (p.123). This is important to safeguard all other cultural domains' autonomy from the state so that they can achieve their true autonomy before God. As for the mission of the church to law he relates it decisively to her proclamation of the gospel. This mission is surely spelt out in the context of the parousia.

In conclusion Ellul indicates that the book is only an introduction, a point of departure, an outline of a method for more detailed work to be done, especially in investigating the content of divine law, of God-given rights, and of God-created institutions. All this, contends Ellul, has to be done with a sense of eschatological urgency (p.140).

2.3) Exposition of the Content - Ellul's Biblico-christological Understanding of God's Gracious Action on Human Law

2.3.1) The Dialectical Form of Ellul's Exposition

What emerges from this profound theological treatise is a basic form and content of theology which can be characterized as a dialectical theology, although it must be remarked that Ellul does not use this characterization in the work. Moreover, this is a dialectical theology peculiar to the author, so much so that we may indeed call it a dialectical theology of the Ellullian type, with a realistic confrontation between divine and human facts. As a dialectical theology it expounds God's No and Yes to man. Moreover, as a dialectical theology of culture it expounds God's No and Yes to human culture as part of God's dialectic with man. In this dialectic God's action confront man's cultural action in history. That is why in expounding this dialectic Ellul sets the facts of God's action in history against the facts of man's cultural action in history.

2.3.2) The Dialectical Content of Ellul's Exposition

Thus Ellul comes to examine the material content of this dialectic. Ellul finds the arena where this dialectic happened to be history and not nature. Moreover, this arena is not general history as such but the particular salvation history of Israel and Christ as witnessed in the Old and the New Testaments and expressed in the creation-covenant-parousia time axis. But it must be pointed out that for Ellul the secular world and its history has been included in this salvation history (*p.13, "this is a (secular) world where Jesus Christ is king"*). Ellul finds the reality of this dialectic to consist of God's action in analogy of grace to human action (*p.50*). This grace is nothing other than the free grace of God's action in Christ (*p.50*), a concrete action analogical to human cultural action in

the covenant and the incarnation. What emerges is a strongly christological and so incarnational understanding of this grace, the dynamic of which does not just consist of confrontations but goes beyond it to endorsement and transformations. Because of the heavy reality of grace implicit in this exposition we can characterize the resultant dialectic as a dialectic of grace. This grace provides not only a theological foundation of law but also of the wider culture, for this grace not only undergirds law but also other cultural institutions of man (e.g. kingship, p.97) in the secular (in French, *laïque*) world in the creation-covenant parousia time axis. That is why when we look into the details of Ellul's exposition we find that it not only considers law in itself, but law in its implication for other cultural domains as well (*Chapter IV: Law, State and Church, pp.122-138*), and therefore for the totality of human existence we call culture or civilization. We shall examine how this theological foundation of grace, for Ellul, replaces nature as the foundation of law and culture, and how this foundational theology answers some of the foundational problems of human culture. We shall examine this dialectic of grace in its epistemological, ontological, teleological, and axiological and normative aspects.

2.3.3) Grace as the Epistemological Foundation of Law and Culture

For an average Christian philosopher, to establish a domain of culture with universal validity among Christians and non-Christians, the usual way of knowledge would be some kind of natural epistemology. The Christian thinker wants to establish law on a basis which is universal but at the same time 'Christian'. In such endeavour, a 'nature' is postulated as being common to all men, as inherent in the creation. Once this procedure of natural theology is adopted, then natural law "*is most often presented as necessitated by Christian doctrine, either as inherent in the nature of man, created by God, or as a part of the order of creation*" (p.10). This serves as the epistemological basis God

leaves behind for human culture to be built on. The failure of man to build his culture on this nature would amount to sin. Thus arises the need for judgment and redemption from God (pp.61-62).

Such is not the epistemological procedure for Ellul. With his inquiry based upon *"the fundamental and certain themes of this revelation"* (p.11), Ellul has established the epistemology of law firmly in the realm of grace instead of nature. This certainly means the grace of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. For him, there is a radical necessity of *"receiving revelation in order to know what is goodness and what is truth"* (p.11). The reason for this is disclosed by revelation as to lie in the Fall (pp.61-62) with its radical separation between God and man. This certainly applies to the epistemology of law. Thus there is no way of knowing what law truly is except through revelation. But this way of revelation is also the way of grace. For if the Fall implies that man is utterly incapable of knowing goodness and truth by himself (p.61), this knowledge of goodness and truth can only be a gift of God beyond the order of the Fall. Such knowledge was indeed given by God in His revelation, and is thus a knowledge of grace.

Thus for Ellul, who confessed to be a Protestant Christian (p.13), his critique of natural law is in fact a confrontation of nature with grace, and his epistemology is that of grace versus that of nature. Whenever he criticizes the theory of natural law he criticizes its idea of nature, and he always does so from the standpoint of revelation, a standpoint which is supplied by the reality of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

The reality of this grace, for Ellul, is Jesus Christ, for he is the revelation of God, the true gnosis (p.62). This grace enlightens not only law, but everything (p.99), for Christ in his incarnation has bound everything that is man's to himself. Thus Christ's incarnation is the ontological ground of this epistemology

of grace. Therefore, to know in grace is to know in Christ, so law can only be known christologically. Any way of knowledge other than revelation of grace in Christ would amount to Gnosticism, for this can only pose some secret way of knowledge apart from Christ (*pp.11,62,64*). It is not even possible for one to claim such knowledge from the creation, for it is also in Christ that God has revealed what He has created (*p.64*). Natural law, in this understanding, is obviously a Gnostic claim for Ellul. This is manifested in the mystical character of its claim (*p.62*). Thus, in order to clear the way for a truly christological understanding of law, a natural epistemology must be ruled out as the theological epistemology for law. Indeed, natural law as theory must be thoroughly demythologized by Christ (*p.80*). In this way natural law as fact can be shown in its true essence as something purely human, "*even an expression of sin*" (*p.57*), as the cultural history of law has borne out (*pp.70-73*).

2.3.4) Grace as the Ontological Foundation of Law and Culture

Natural law theories do not just make epistemological claims. They base their epistemological claims on more fundamental ontological claims concerning the creation. If all men are called to comprehend natural law with their reason, this means that there is a physical nature common to all men (*p.10*). Moreover, there is an objective order of creation in which natural law is inherent (*p.10*). Nature, in short, is an ontological as well as epistemological category.

For Ellul, this ontological claim of a nature in man or in creation, which compels man to acknowledge natural law, is a false claim. He denounces this firstly by drawing attention to the legal facts in history, showing that natural law as fact is only a stage in legal history. And more significantly, he appeals to the ontological ground implicit in revelation. It is this ontological ground which we shall come to see in detail.

As revelation is given to man to provide the epistemological basis for law, there is certainly an ontological ground undergirding it. We can characterize this basis as an ontological ground of grace because of its sheer givenness. The sheer givenness implies that this ontological ground is deeply transcendental and relational in character. Therefore, the ontological ground for law can in no way reside in law itself. Nor can appeal be made to a creation with a nature inherent in it. Both law and creation must be related to this ontological ground which is given to them and transcends them. Again because of this givenness we cannot identify law with this ontological ground. In this understanding law can only act as a sign of this ontological ground.

For natural law theories basing their claims on the Greek idealist concept of nature, there is no such ontological understanding of grace. There is only an ontology of nature. Even allowing for the existence of grace such theories do not allow for a radical discontinuity between nature and grace. If grace is needed to complement nature this does not mean that nature is corrupt. It may be inadequate but it still provides the ground for grace to work on. Nature, for natural law proponents, does not only provide a universal basis for law, but for all domains of culture as well, and grace, if any, can only perfect it.

Such understanding, Ellul points out, has resulted in the severe controversy between idealism and materialism (p.8). Ellul has observed sharply that all idealistic understandings of law are based on their respective understanding of nature (p.23). All such understandings of nature do not in fact depart from a Greek substantialist ontology. This is radically different from the Hebraic relational ontology to which Ellul appeals.

For Ellul, the ontological ground of law resides in God, in His acts of justice. In a dynamic understanding of God rooted in the Hebraic tradition, he

understands God as constantly sustaining His creation (p.65). This rules out any deistic understanding of creation (p.65), any understanding of creation through the mediation of an eternal immanent nature. In this ontological understanding nature cannot act as an epistemological bridge alongside revelation.

Furthermore, Ellul understands the ontological ground of law in Christ. Its givenness is that of Christ -- who is the true "*link between human law and divine law*" (p.62). His presence in creation, covenant, incarnation and parousia is the true basis for law. It is only in this Hebraic and christological understanding of ontology that Ellul can transcend Greek substantialism and the resultant ontological and epistemological impasse of the idealist-materialist controversy.

What kind of ontological basis for law, then, does come out of this ontological ground of grace in Christ?

Firstly, there is the divine righteousness that God has infused into the world through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This righteousness is nothing but the person of Jesus Christ (pp.41ff). Thus "*the foundation of human law resides in Him*" (p.44). Secondly, God's action, especially in the event of Christ's death, takes the sequence judgment-justice-law (p.50) which as a '*juridical framework*' is incarnationally "*chosen by God from among human achievements to make us understand his action...Thus law must be such as to express God's action*" (pp.49-50). Thirdly, God has entered into covenants with man in order to restore man to his true situation as creature (pp.53). In these covenants which culminate in Jesus Christ God establishes his law over against man (p.55), grants man certain rights (p.55), and ratifies the existence of human law (p.55-56). What these expositions amount to is that divine righteousness has been instituted in history, in the form of law, with man included into its orbit via a divine covenant. Thus as a whole human law has now been ontologically grounded in history, in fact in

a salvation history, not general history, by God's action which is full of juridical significance. And human law which claims itself to be grounded in nature and natural justice is shown to be purely "*created by man*", and "*juridical rules are inherent in sin*" (p.57).

2.3.5) Grace as the Teleological Foundation of Law and Culture

Within the framework of Greek substantialist ontology, natural law theories with their concepts of nature also have their respective teleologies. On the one hand, nature is seen as eternal and justified in itself to merit as law's purpose. Thus it is asserted that the justice to be achieved by natural law is inherent in law itself. Such understanding reinforces a deistic understanding of creation, and excludes God Himself as the goal of creation. Such assertion in fact demonstrates the close connection between an immanent ontology and an immanent teleology.

On the other hand, materialistic or technical law, which is in fact the culmination of the evolution of natural law, has explicitly stated that it has no inherent purposes to achieve. In fact, materialistic law has its own view of nature conceived as purely materialistic without any natural justice inherent in it, and so does not constitute a purpose for law. With the loss of an understanding of inherent justice (p.33), law is bound to seek purposes outside of itself which are other than justice. Thus law is left to serve any purposes man or institutions (e.g. the state) may demand (p.32).

For Ellul, there is an implicit teleological dimension to divine righteousness, "*for the righteousness of God moves toward a destination, the judgment of the world and the second coming of Christ...Accordingly, law must not be seen exclusively in relation to the covenant, its origin and point of departure*" (p.94). Thus epistemologically speaking, the teleology of law needs

revelation as much as the ontology, because the ontology does not imply the teleology. Revelation is for law not only revelation of ontology but also of teleology. Therefore revelation overcomes all idealistic and materialistic teleologies and ontologies of law, by its teleology and ontology of grace in Christ. And just as the ontological ground of law comes from revelation, the teleological purposes of law are also disclosed by the same revelation.

In parallel with the dynamic Hebraic understanding of ontology, law is also understood as moving towards a destination determined by God. So both ontologically and teleologically speaking law is not law by itself and for itself. Both the ontology and teleology of law are provided by the same source, who is God Himself. Thus both aspects transcend law itself since both are related to God. Both arise from the action of God, having their common origin in the covenant and linked to its eschatological fulfillment (p.99).

However, the teleology of law is not absorbed into the ontology. Rather, it is the teleological action of God which supplies law with its true ontological grounding. For Ellul, this is a teleology of grace in Christ which is continuous with the ontology of grace in Christ. *"The realization of human law is accomplished by Him."* (p.44) The righteousness of law is seen to be moving to Christ (p.94). The last judgment is deeply incarnational. It is seen to supply the teleological gravity of law (p.96) because *"God appropriates and applies human law with all its pragmatism and contingency"* (pp.95-96). In fact, the whole order which law affirms must be christocentric (p.107). The so called autonomous law which separates itself from Christ and his eschatological purpose will only become without purpose or subjected to some heteronomic purposes.

Yet there is a deep unity between this teleology of law and its ontology. For in the economic action of God the nature of time is simply transformed. It

is no longer linear as we perceive it. Rather, the relationship between the covenant and the final judgment, between the point of departure and the destination point, i.e., the point of origin and the point of telos, is eternal, and is already inherent in justice itself (*p.99*). Therefore, the role of law is the human, partial, and contingent realization of a covenant which will be fulfilled only at the end of time. Whatever is at the origin of law, has its validity only in this fulfillment. This means that this graceful teleology of law is precisely the fulfillment of its ontology. So, similar to natural law theories, there is a close connection between ontology and teleology in the revelational foundation of law.

2.3.6) Grace as the Axiological and Normative Foundation of Law and Culture

A consideration of the theological foundation of law must deal with law's axiological and normative aspect. Here, although Ellul does not devote a particular section to it, he has in fact advanced a similar dialectic between divine values and norms and human values and norms. As expected, natural law theories again posit the normative value of law (and rights) either on its immanent ontology or teleology, thus advocating natural justice as an immanent justice (*p.110*), as the intrinsic norm and value for law (*pp.62-63*). Or, on the ground of its lack of any immanent ontology and teleology because of a materialistic conception of law's nature, autonomy of law is completely denied, thus paving the way for law to be subjected to arbitrary heteronomy, so that law serves heteronomic values and norms such as administrative efficiency or the state's interest.

For Ellul, any advocacy of the normativity of nature is ruled out by the fact-norm chasm (*p.71*). Behind his understanding of this chasm lies his understanding of the confrontation of human facts by divine facts, which judges any human or natural norms and values supposed to arise from human facts. Thus human facts

will never become normative for us (p.12), and natural law as fact cannot make a claim over man. To say that natural law is based on the fact of nature implies the further recognition that it cannot be normative (p.70). Nature is disallowed to be the source of norms and values binding both God and man (p.138). To believe that natural law is normative because it is based on the fact of nature is to revive the old belief in the excellence of nature (p.71), which is part and parcel of the Greek idealistic understanding of nature. Such understanding, sees Ellul, goes against the biblical understanding that nature is '*subjected to futility*' (p.71). It is this insight which for Ellul validates the chasm between fact and norm.

Although Ellul perceives that idealistic natural law theories are intended to prevent law from being subjected to heteronomy by man (p.138), he rejects their understanding of an immanent normativity and axiology (pp.11,12). For him, in the realistic confrontation of human fact by divine fact, the reality of the fact of natural law disallowed this. For natural law which in fact exists has a grounding outside itself (p.71), which is the source of its authority (p.72). Law simply cannot be law to itself. That means it cannot be completely autonomous (p.138). Natural law as cultural-historical fact "*has an essentially permanent content*" (p.72). This presupposes an outside value and norm to provide a fundamental unity, for "*it is impossible to rely either on the unity of human nature or on the unity of reason, given the considerable variety of orientations existing in the history of civilization*" (p.72). Thus natural law requires a justice which transcends the social and economic conditions that brought about it. Surely a value and norm transcending man has to be introduced (p.72).

For Ellul, only the grace of God can overcome the fact-norm chasm, for only God can be the source of values and norms, and only divine facts can overcome the fact-norm chasm and provide the norm and value which law (and rights)

needs, which is divine righteousness or justice (pp.37-45).¹⁷ This is provided by grace, just as the being and telos of law are provided by grace. In this understanding, justice is not based on law itself but on grace (p.87), and judgement-justice-law is normative only because it is an analogy of the gracious action of God (p.50).

This normativity and axiology of grace is foremostly a normativity and axiology of revelation. To know this normativity and axiology is to know what is in conformity with divine revelation, since goodness and truth can only be revealed by it (p.11).

But more centrally, such normativity and axiology of grace are the normativity and axiology of Christ (p.67), since we know this grace fulfilling all righteousness in Christ (p.98). Even the so called divine law cannot have its normativity and axiology in itself, but only in the Gospel of Christ (p.67). He is the basis for law to be exercised with compassion (p.119). Thus *"the qualification of human law is given by Him"* (p.44). Christ as Lord is the true norm and value even for secular law, for he is himself divine righteousness. Therefore, in posing Christ as the supreme norm and value for law Ellul is in fact subordinating law to the gospel.

This normativity and axiology in Christ is deeply ontological and teleological, for it hinges on Christ's incarnation and redemption. Law has *"no value apart from the facts of incarnation and redemption"* (p.78). Therefore, it transcends time. This norm and value of grace is valid in the covenant as well as in eschatological fulfillment (p.99). Although this eschatology denies law any moral

¹⁷ Ehrhardt has discussed the subtle difference between the Anglo-saxon and the Continental understandings of justice and righteousness, so that in English there is better rendering of the biblical concept in terms of 'righteousness'. See Ehrhardt, "Christianity and Law".

or religious content (p.105), yet *"within this eschatological perspective, man's judgment in the realm of law assumes its rightful value"* (p.113). Similarly, law's value over violence is grounded in the eschaton (p.113). It is in the eschatological perspective that submission to law is sufficient to oppose arbitrariness and the spirit of power (p.114).

Therefore, this divine norm and value arising from divine facts enables law to be truly autonomous from man (p.114). That is why we have to be truly theocentric in law, and to formulate the meaning of human institutions and justice *"with reference to God"* (p.12, *Ellul's own italic*), *"according to his revelation"* (p.12). Lastly, the divine norm and value eventually includes human norm and value in grace. It says yes to the pragmatic value of juridical technique (p.112), when divine righteousness meets human justice in Christ and renders human pragmatic justice normative and valuable in preserving the world for redemption. Indeed, not only pragmatic justice, but the whole institution of law is thus founded by grace to be normative and valuable in preserving the world for redemption.

2.4) Ellul's Basic Insights on Culture

Human Culture as Human Enslavement and its True Autonomy under the Lordship of Christ

Having examined how Ellul has replaced nature with God's grace in Christ as the foundation of law, we shall go on to see how this theological foundation answers some of the foundational problems of human culture, and serves as the larger framework for Ellul to tackle the institution of law as one of culture's core institutions. We have to draw the threads of what we have expounded above together around the central theme of human culture's autonomy. At the start we must first draw from our analysis above an important observation, namely, that

Ellul has reached a bipartite theological understanding of human culture. The first part of this understanding arises from the critical dimension of this work, which concerns the nature of human culture under the Fall. The second part arises from the descriptive-normative dimension of the work, which concerns human culture in the transformation process brought about by God's action in Christ.

2.4.1) Human Culture as Purely Anthropological Reality under the Fall

Ontologically, in answer to the primary question 'What is culture?' Ellul does not pursue a dogmatic theological understanding from the biblical witness. That is, he does not discuss what God originally intends culture and its institutions to be. This, for Ellul, would be a futile and illegitimate attempt to penetrate into the essence of the transcendent God.¹⁸ Rather, from the viewpoint of revelation he embarks from the earliest stage on a criticism of human culture.

At the actual level, when Ellul comes to consider human culture as it is, he considers it in the context of the Fall. This is the historical context where human culture arises and operates (p.71). Thus existentially and actually, he locates the essence of human culture in man. This anthropological location has already been the result of a critical theological understanding. For in the perspective of revelation Ellul rejects any attempt to locate the essence of human culture in ^{the original} creation, as the Greek philosophical tradition has all along tried to do. We have already expounded on this point. This does not mean that for Ellul human culture does not take on any element from creation, but it does mean that for Ellul it is essentially an act of *homo faber* after the Fall. It is primarily a creation of man (p.63), and its nature can be described variously as human work (p.97) or human inventions (pp.96,109-120,119). However, in the context of this

¹⁸ See p.140, "we shall never penetrate the essence of the rights God accords to man or the essence of institutions."

Fall as the rupture between God and man, even an analysis of human culture in its purely anthropological reality would carry theological implications. This implies that even secular (in French, *laïque*) culture cannot be devoid of any theological pretensions.

Certainly, this ontological understanding is also deeply teleological and normative and axiological in character, which means that there are definite purposes and norms and values associated with this human cultural undertaking. But just as it cannot be claimed to found its essence on a divine nature, it cannot be claimed to serve divine purposes and norms and values, as there are no such purposes and norms and values inherent in nature. Therefore, it only serves human pragmatic purposes and norms and values.

"When man establishes law he does not seek to reproduce a sovereign norm of justice. Rather, he tries.....to permit the preservation of life.....He seeks success, and this is really the measure of his creation of law. Man does not conform to an ideal, but strives for tangible results. He acts, and his action may or may not be just in God's sight. His endeavour serves the preservation of the world." (p.91)

What is said here can be equally said of all institutions of culture. Thus Ellul completely strips human culture of any claim to lofty purposes and norms and values, and shows it to be no more than a pragmatic human undertaking in itself.

2.4.2) The Onset of the Problem of Human Culture

The real problem of human culture starts, therefore, when theological intentions enter human law-making and other cultural actions. Man tries to gain autonomy from God (p.73) through such actions. He pretends his culture to be

modelled after an implicit divine 'nature' built into creation by God. Here Ellul criticizes all institutions of human culture which claim to be modelled after the original creation, for this would mean that enough of God's original creation is left intact after the Fall, so that man can claim his culture to exhibit divine characteristics and to secure divine approval. The whole pretension, as Ellul sees it, is to push the Triune God outside human culture (p.11). Thus human culture can be seen as an attempt at gaining human autonomy from God.

However, this act of human autonomy quickly leads to a state of human enslavement. The result for man, in the long run, is that this culture, which man initially thinks can achieve autonomy for him, does not fulfill his wish at all (p.45). Human law, for example, does become autonomous, not only from God, but from man (e.g. in technical law p.32)! Therefore, rather than gaining freedom for man, it imposes a kind of necessity on man. Thus man's attempt at gaining autonomy from God through cultural action quickly becomes man's subjection to the heteronomy of culture. And culture becomes the heteronomous rather than the autonomous factor, from the culture of man to the culture governing man. Moreover, each cultural institution may in turn also be subjected to heteronomy, as when it is controlled by each other (*Chapter IV, pp.122-138*) or by some spirit of power (p.73). Under such spirit of power, human culture is posed as a rebellious work to God. It becomes an instrument of Satan (p.73), and its various domains *"appear to us as the expression of man's will as opposed to God's will"* (p.97).

2.4.3) Human Culture's Character as Sin

Thus under the epistemology of revelation, sin (in terms of human

hubris) is shown to be human culture's most pertinent character (p.97).¹⁹ It can be said that, for Ellul, human culture as it is is definitely a culture of sin under the Fall. The result of such sin is heteronomy - man subjected to culture's heteronomy, and cultural institutions subjected to each other. Moreover, human culture invariably becomes sacralized. Facing the situation of the Fall and sin, man pretends that this natural law created by him arises from God's creation and contains "*a germ of justice deposited by God*" (p.65). As a cultural institution, "*law is established as an end in itself and attempts to assure the salvation of man and the close-knit organization of society by its own means*" (p.104). Ellul criticizes such redemptive overtones, for "*man simply cannot invoke his just work before God*" (p.42) in order to be saved. Human culture is precisely one such human work. That is why even in the well-intentioned effort of natural law, Ellul detects a "*tremendous effort at reconciliation beyond grace*" (p.11), for nature is simply conceived as the source of norms and values binding both God and man (p.138). That is also why human culture inevitably tends to become something grotesque. Its institutions become domains autonomous from God and man. These tend to increase their own power at the expense of their own effectiveness for the service of man (p.72).

2.4.4) Interim Evaluation - Negativity and Positivity of Ellul's View of Culture

Is this theological understanding of human culture under the Fall too negative? Culture is first shown to be something purely human, then something connected with sin. However, it must be appreciated that this negativity is spelt out within the positive action of God in grace. Thus this negative understanding is preparatory for us to understand the positive grace God has provided for human culture. Only under this criticism of its theological pretensions, can Ellul achieve

¹⁹ See also Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), p.143, "Because of sin all the works of civilization are marked by the infamy of their origin."

epistemological freedom in his cultural-historical analyses of human culture. Otherwise, the Christian philosopher who is too enthusiastic towards human culture is prone to read too much theological merit into it. Yet this does not mean that Ellul's theological criticism of human culture overlooks its theological intention. Rather, such intention is made explicit through the criticism, and this paves the way for such intention to be answered by God's ultimately positive action. Thus in the case of natural law, Ellul uncovers *"the constant concern on the part of the theologians.....to find a common ground for encounter between Christians and non-Christians....the desire to be able to come to an understanding beyond the tragic separation created by revelation and grace,"* (p.10), and the *"tremendous effort at reconciliation beyond grace"* (p.11).

In short, we can say that Ellul has located human culture as it is firmly under the Fall, so that he can understand human culture as it is actually in man, and to understand its concomitant problems of autonomy and heteronomy. In the light of God's action on culture, he can go on to see how this human culture is to be transformed. We shall examine this second part of his understanding now.

2.4.5) Human Culture as It Has Been and Will Be Transformed in Grace

In Ellul's understanding, the crucial change for human law and culture has not happened in human action of ordinary history, but in God's salvific economic action in Christ. For Ellul, this salvation extends from God's covenant with man, culminating in history via the action of Christ to his parousia. In this divine economy human law and culture has been transposed from the locus of the Fall to that of redemption. Thus the definitive ontological foundation of human culture lies in the economic action of God. In this economic action of God, not only the ontology, but the teleology, epistemology, axiology and normativity of human culture have all been transformed.

In the light of revelation, Ellul sees culture's true autonomy from man in grace. There is no original autonomy of culture immanent in nature. Culture as an autonomous entity (e.g. in the case of law) does not even exist in the Bible (p.45). Ellul sees culture in God, in the action of God (e.g. in His executing divine righteousness). He sees the Old Testament covenant as God's action which provides the first link with human culture (p.51). In His covenantal action God takes up the human cultural institution of law to symbolize His action. However, the supreme point in which God's action meets man's action is in Christ.

2.4.6) Human Culture's Real Transformation in Christ

Christ took up all human sins and also all compartments of human life (p.57). Firstly, Christ demythologizes with his revelation all cultural institutions pretending to be divine. For instance, his action judges natural law as an unchristological link between divine law and human law (p.62). In fact, the whole relationship between God's revelation and culture is in Christ (pp.10,13). He reveals the false epistemology, the false ontology, the false teleology, and the false normativity and axiology man presumes to be undergirding his culture. He in turn provides the true epistemology; ontology, teleology, and normativity and axiology for culture in grace.

Secondly, in terms of the incarnation, divine law and human law are linked in and by him (p.62). Human law undergoes judgement and redemption in him and is subjected to him (p.97). Christ takes up genuine humanity, and through his appropriations all compartments of human culture ^{are} ~~is~~ radically linked to him (p.57) and through him to God. This is a link in grace, not in nature. He provides the foundation, the realization, and the qualification of human law (p.44). In fact, there can be no human cultural counterpart to divine culture without Christ (p.42). Or we say that Christ actualized divine culture as human

culture on earth. This means that human culture must be thoroughly christonomic. Law, as a cultural institution, must be directly related to Christ and his righteousness (p.123), and be transformed into an instrument of justice (p.58).

2.4.7) Human Culture's True Order Founded in Christ

Human cultural institutions form into an order, and law has a pivotal role in formulating this order. Therefore, in the christological transformation of law, human culture's true order is now founded in Christ. Only in the redemption of Christ can divine order and human order be brought together as a christocentric order (pp.105-109). This thoroughly christological transformation of human cultural order is particularly important.

In a typical natural theology of culture, the human cultural order is identified as a natural order supposed to be founded on a divinized nature or an order of creation. Thus via a so-called natural order human order is linked to the divine order. However, there is no such thing as a natural order in Ellul's understanding, for he understands order, like all aspects of human culture, as a purely human cultural invention. Therefore, human cultural order cannot claim to correspond or reflect divine order by positing itself to be a natural order. In fact, with the breakdown of natural law and natural order's claim to divinity, human law becomes an artificial creator of order, rendering this human order plainly arbitrary. For Ellul, such order will no longer be genuine order, but '*established disorder*' (p.106), for it is not based on the justice of God and can only perpetuate injustice. In Ellul's understanding, man can only hope to formulate a genuine human cultural order by recognizing the christocentric reality behind the God-given institutions (e.g. ownership) in His creation and giving actual forms to them (pp.106-108). Moreover, such human forms must

serve the soteriological and eschatological purposes revealed in Christ. Only in this Christonomy can a human order truly correspond to the divine order without needing to posit as a natural order.

2.4.8) Human Culture's True Time Founded in God's Action in Christ

Ellul has found that human culture and law, in their anthropological reality, were founded under the Fall, in the epoch of fallen time. Now because of the economic action of God human culture and law have been transposed into the creation-covenant-parousia axis, which is an axis of redeemed time. This time axis is founded by God's action of grace in Christ, for it is defined by the preparation and return of Christ. That means as a whole Ellul has founded human culture in a temporal foundation that is theocentric as well as christocentric.

Moreover, since Ellul rejects founding culture on nature, this temporal foundation is especially important as it has shifted culture's foundation from nature and man to history. Yet this is not a pantheistic history that tries to work out its immanent possibilities or determinisms, but a theonomic and christonomic history that is transcendently determined by the eschaton. That is why the eschaton is so important for human law and culture's teleology (p.99). This is certainly the theological reason which instills a sense of urgency into Ellul's intended theo-cultural programme of law (p.140).

2.4.9) The Lordship of God in Human Culture in Christ

Thus in Ellul's understanding human culture is subjected to the lordship of Christ, and its transformation can only be achieved within this lordship. It can be said that the whole guiding thought for Ellul's theological undertaking on law and other domains of culture is motivated by this lordship of Christ. It is his deep conviction that *"no compartment of human life remains alien to Christ"* (p.57)

who is also king of the secular world (p.13). Thus there is a dialectic between facts of the concrete Lordship of Christ and human cultural-historical facts (p.97). Thus to elaborate a theological foundation of law is to elaborate how law as an institution of human life or culture is taken up into the lordship of Christ and transformed.

As is discussed above, in Ellul's understanding, to seek for cultural autonomy without God can only be problematic. For in his understanding of domains of human culture as material powers (p.72) under sin (p.71), a quest for autonomy would only result in incessant increase in power without purpose, and this would result only in such powers being subjected to other powers, rendering the heteronomic situation even worse. However, Ellul has also shown that it would not do to appeal to some divinized nature to bolster up such powers' claim to autonomy. That is why he thinks that to revive the theory of natural law in order to check another Nazi heteronomy on law will be ineffective (pp.8-10). In order to prevent the state's heteronomy on law, a true autonomy of law must be found, and he finds this in theonomy.

For Ellul, the autonomy of law does not mean that it can be a law to itself. Rather, we must *"specify in what respect it is autonomous. It is autonomous in regard to any human force, and hence also to nature"* (p.138). From this we can see that for Ellul the concept of autonomy is relative rather than absolute. Only in being independent from human forces can law cease to be the direct or indirect outcome of some human activity and become *"the autonomous power intended by God"* (p.138). Thus a true autonomy for any cultural domain does not firstly mean independence from other cultural domains. A true autonomy means that such domain should firstly be theonomic, that means be relative to God, not to man. In reality this means being open to Christ (p.115). Only in dependence on God can a cultural domain find the true freedom and autonomy

from man and from other cultural domains.

However, such autonomy does not mean that a cultural domain cannot harbour any mission or responsibility towards man and other domains. Rather, each is to help the other institutions and man towards Christ. Since God's purposes for human culture have been revealed in His incarnated action in Christ, the whole problem of culture's autonomy can thus be viewed within Christ's lordship in history. That is why the church as an institution from God must recognize the independent relation of law (and other domains of culture) to Christ, and be willing to help it in that direction. She must prevent law (and culture) from usurping the prerogative of Christ, by denying law any normativity for spiritual life (*p.105*). Only when the church recognizes its true autonomy in Christ, can the church know how to act to reinforce this autonomy.

Therefore, a theonomic autonomy implies serious duties towards man and other cultural domains. The fulfilment of such duties does not contradict but constitutes the true freedom and autonomy of a cultural domain, for such duties are in fact intended by God. That is why Ellul does not speak of autonomy or heteronomy in absolute terms, but speaks of how the lordship of Christ orders the relations among different cultural domains. One cultural domain may even be subordinated to another, or be served by another, so as to fulfill the end intended by God in Christ. Moreover, man, in submitting to such cultural institutions like law, prevents himself from exercising heteronomy on them, and prepares himself to submit to the lordship of God.

2.5) Analysis of Significance

- What Type of Theology of Culture is Exemplified?

2.5.1) Significance of Method - An Economic Theology of Culture

After we have examined Ellul's work on law in its foundational dialectic of grace with nature, to see how this foundational theology answers the foundational problems of human culture, it is time to examine what we can learn from this work for a theology of culture. The first thing we can learn is the particular type of theology of culture he is exemplifying here, namely, a theology of culture which is founded thoroughly in God's action in history, i.e., in divine economy. Thus we can characterize it as an economic theology of culture. As we have indicated in the last chapter, this is the type of theology of culture we must first go for, before we can go to other types of theology of culture, for other types of theology of culture must be controlled by it.

2.5.1.1) First Characteristic: Theological Realism

Since this economic theology of culture is founded in a theological reality rather than ideologies or theories, there is a profound theological realism in it. Thus for Ellul, God's actions in history are facts to be reckoned with. It is these facts, theological facts, rather than any theological theories or ideologies, that actually enter into dialectic with human cultural-historical facts and transform them. Therefore, we can say that for Ellul the dialectic is first and foremost an economic dialectic of God, which is a realistic dialectic in history rather than an idealistic dialectic in theory.

2.5.1.2) Second Characteristic: An Economic Method of Theology

Correspondingly, for Ellul, the theological exposition of this dialectic must be in conformity with the dialectic itself. That means there is an intrinsic connection between its ontology and epistemology. Thus it is by grasping revelational facts of the divine economy that we can understand the dialectic, and draw out the theological significance of human cultural-historical facts, as well as point out the theological transformations such cultural-historical facts have

undergone. This is what Ellul has done in the chapter (*Chapter I, pp.37-59*) on divine law. This means that for Ellul an economic theology demands an economic method of theology. In this method, the theological facts have epistemological priority over human cultural-historical facts. Yet this does not mean that we have to expound theological facts first. Epistemological priority does not imply temporal or logical priority. And Ellul in fact has set out the cultural-historical facts of law history before he expounds on divine law (*Preliminary Chapter, pp.17-36*). Moreover, such facts are allowed to be what they are in their sheer cultural-historical reality, and no positive immanent theological meaning is required of them before they are taken into the orbit of the economic dialectic. What is essential is that their theological interpretation be controlled by the theological facts.

2.5.1.3) Third Characteristic: Biblical Expositional Method of Theology

An important characteristic of Ellul's economic method of theology, is his emphasis on biblical exposition rather than philosophy as the tool to understand revelational facts of the divine economy, although philosophical thinking does play a supporting role in this expositional undertaking. In order to know what is in conformity with revelation (*p.11*) in this particular cultural domain of law, Ellul embarks on a wide-ranging exposition of biblical material, expounding the whole Bible, especially the Old Testament.

2.5.1.4) Fourth Characteristic: Christological and Incarnational Hermeneutic of the Economic Dialectic

Ellul, however, is not content with interpreting these biblical texts as separately inspired by the Holy Spirit, less as proof-texts for his own theology of law. Rather, he always exegetes them with reference to Christ as the decisive Word of God. Thus a further characteristic of this method of theology is the

thoroughly christological and incarnational character of his exposition of the dialectic between divine facts and human facts. Christ is not only the Word of God and the essence and fulfilment of the teaching of Scripture. Indeed in his very person he necessarily entered into dialectical confrontation with cultural-historical facts. Yet in the incarnation this dialectic goes beyond confrontation to appropriation (p.97) and transformation. Therefore these facts of Christ the Lord become determinative for human cultural-historical facts.

2.5.1.5) Fifth Characteristic: The Decisive Rejection of Natural Theology

Another characteristic which necessarily follows from this economic biblical christological method of theology is Ellul's decisive rejection of natural theology as the theological method for a theology of law and culture. As God has acted revelationally in human cultural history, there is no need for a way of theology in nature. Moreover, the very event of revelation implies that such a natural way of theology is in reality impossible, for revelation has revealed man and creation and human culture to be under the Fall. In the vein of a Protestant Reformed theological tradition especially under the influence of Karl Barth, Ellul rejects natural theology and does not allow cultural-historical facts to act as a source for theology. This is crucial, for given the close affinity between natural theology and natural law, natural theology is a negative factor for founding law in revelation.

The positive ground for this theological rejection rests solely on the Word of God as is well-demonstrated in this work. In the Word of God, God's revelation and grace happened decisively, and the tragic separation between God and man (p.11) are overcome by this revelation and grace of God Himself, rather than by nature. That is why Ellul's first task is *"to know first of all what is in conformity with the divine revelation"* (p.11).

2.5.1.6) Sixth Characteristic: Freedom to Understand Human Cultural-historical Facts as They are

What Ellul has achieved in this decisive rejection of natural theology is a complete demythologization and desacralization of nature and natural law as an ideology, so that they can no longer act as the theological foundation of law and culture. This demythologization and desacralization is achieved through the dialectic between cultural ideologies of law and the theological truths provided by revelation. To carry out this dialectic Ellul had to engage both in cultural-historical studies and theological reflections. This dual engagement has since become characteristic of Ellul in all his subsequent works.²⁰

With such an economic method that finds the source of theological truths solely in the divine economy, Ellul rigorously forbids cultural-historical facts to provide theological truths. For him, these facts are not on a par with revelation. Not that these are not facts of reality, but that they are only human facts which are purely human inventions without any basis whatsoever on a nature that is divine. That is to say, these are only facts of purely human reality, not facts of divine reality. For Ellul it would be pretentious to turn these facts into a full-blown ideology carrying theological assertions. That is why, Ellul does not seek "*attenuations or compromises*" for natural law theories "*because of observed facts*" (p.11) of natural law.

Moreover, with a sharp distinction drawn between cultural-historical facts and their theological theorizations, such an economic method does not impose some immanent theological meaning on such facts. Thus we are impressed by

²⁰ Thus it would be inexact for Hanks to describe Ellul's *The Humiliation of the Word*, tr. Joyce M. Hanks (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985) as the first work in which sociological and theological studies are carried out side by side. See Hanks, *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, p.xii.

Ellul impartial treatment of natural law as fact. Ellul has achieved a diastasis (i.e., separation) between divine and human facts, allowing the latter to be confronted by the former. Surely the sharp distinction was not drawn arbitrarily and subjectively by Ellul. Rather, it is the transcendence of God's revelation that renders this distinction imperative, and provides for revelation its own freedom from human cultural facts. Though the divine facts of revelation also appear as actual cultural-historical facts in history, nevertheless they are of divine reality and carry theological truths. In this way revelation frees Ellul to observe cultural-historical facts as they are, rather than allowing them to *"become normative for us"* (p.12).

2.5.1.7) Seventh Characteristic: Bringing out the Theological Significance of Human Cultural-historical Facts in the Economic Dialectic

Lastly, in this economic method, the confrontation of human facts by divine facts as recorded in the Bible signifies an important epistemological movement. In this movement extrabiblical cultural-historical facts are taken up into a hermeneutical process in which divine facts confront and interpret human cultural -historical facts, demythologizing their ideological divine pretensions, bringing out their human reality, while at the same time showing what theological significance they can still have within the divine economy. It is in this vein that Ellul, after unmasking the theological pretensions of natural law, arrives at the true theological significance of natural law as raising *"the real question of law"* (p.72), which can only be answered by divine law.

2.5.1.8) Conclusion

Thus within Ellul's economic theology of culture, the confrontation between revelation and law is an actual confrontation between actual revelation and actual culture in actual history, rather than an ideological one between philosophical

ideas of God and philosophical ideas of culture in a timeless matrix. Moreover, this theological confrontation is an early example of Ellul's dialectic, which is a dialectic issuing directly from Ellul's theological realism, rather than from a theoretical dialectic of ideas. It is the reality of revelation that provides the basis for this dialectical confrontation. The confrontation between revelation and law is possible because revelation has already entered into an '*indissoluble union*' with man (p.134) in Christ's incarnation. Without this point of contact established by revelation itself this dialectic would be impossible.

For all theologies of culture, it can be said that the crucial problem in their method lies in the category of culture itself. The problem is: how can a theology which purports to deal with this category in its content accommodate the presence of the same category in its method? The solution exemplified by this economic theology of culture lies in this, namely, that the category of culture is expunged from its methodology. Certainly, this does not mean that the presence of the category of culture in the very event of God's revelation can be thus expunged. Nor has Ellul tried to do so. In the next chapter, we shall see more of Ellul's understanding of culture's place in God's revelational action. Here, it suffices to say that Ellul's method allows him to concentrate on human culture, first as it is in a human context, then as it is before God, in the context of divine economy.

2.5.2) Significance of Content - Motives and Dimensional Profile of this Theology of Culture of Ellul

According to our discussion in the last chapter, a theology of culture may consist of three dimensions, namely, the descriptive or definitive, the critical or analytic and the normative or constructive ones. Thus we shall try to analyze the proportion of these dimensions and their interrelations in this work.

2.5.2.1) *What are Ellul's Motives in this Theology of Law?*

Our analysis would be much simplified if we pause to look at the different motives or concerns behind this work. As we have analyzed in the last chapter, the motives or concerns behind a theology of culture will affect its typology and its dimensional emphasis.

What is immediately obvious, as we have noted above, is Ellul's intensive cultural-historical concern, especially for a post-war culture. This is a dominant motive that is reflected in the approach of the work. For in traditional dogmatic theology where a theological concern is paramount, law is usually subordinated to the theological discussion of the gospel. But here Ellul is seen paying particular attention to law as a theological and cultural domain in its own right.

Certainly, this does not mean that no other motives can be harboured in the same work. Rather, the cultural-historical concern inevitably leads to an ethical concern, for as we have noted in Section 2.1.3, Ellul has wanted to build up this domain of law as the normative institution to structure other cultural institutions. This is reflected in the work, especially in the discussion of the purpose of law (*pp.100-121*), and in *Chapter IV* dealing with the relationship between law, state and church. Besides, the evangelistic and missionary motive or concern is also manifested in the section dealing with the proclamatory function of law for the eschaton (*pp.114-121*). In similar vein, Ellul includes the church's responsibility toward law as part of her proclamation of the gospel (*p.134*). These other motives being so, it must also be pointed out that Ellul's intense cultural-historical concern is well under theological control or disciplined by theological understanding, so much so that he would not tend to deify human culture and take it for its own sake as the ultimate end, but would take it in the larger and more ultimate perspective of God and man's ultimate destiny in His eschaton. That is to say, his cultural-historical concern is decidedly theocentric

and at one with his theological concern.

2.5.2.2) *Dimensional Profile of the Work*

These motives being so, no wonder that this work of Ellul is basically a normative one. The whole exercise is to draw a constructive or normative understanding of what human rights and law should strive to be in the light of revelation. The dialectic between divine facts and human facts does not just issue in criticisms, but also in a truer understanding of what human culture should be.

In this work, a normative theological foundation has been set up to guide Christian action in relation to the institutions of law and state. We have mentioned that in Ellul's work the church must deny law any normativity for spiritual life (p.105), to prevent it from usurping the prerogative of Christ. More positively, Christians and the church should encourage man to act by law (e.g. to mete out judgement by law, pp.110-114), and to affirm its purpose for the last judgement (p.105).

This normative foundation also facilitates further theo-cultural analyses to be done. As has been indicated by Ellul in the conclusion (p.130), the next work would be a *"theological study...dealing with the problem of the content of divine law. This is the theological investigation of the rights accorded by God to the human person for fulfilling his God-given vocation, and an investigation of the institutions created by God for man"* (p.139). Then, *"on the basis of this theological findings...detailed juridical work can be done"* (p.139), not to draw *"direct juridical consequences concerning either juridical principles or modern positive law"* (p.139), but to address *"actual juridical problems"* (p.140).²¹ In

²¹ What Ellul is saying in this conclusion is not totally clear. Our quotation and rearrangement represents what we can make out of this obscure passage. For consistency's and clarity's sake, we have departed from the translator's rendering of *"actual legal problems"* (p.140)

short, such theological work is not to build up a specific Christian law, but to enable Christians to act Christianly when practising secular human law.

However, the above normative theo-cultural programme on law cannot be achieved without Ellul first advancing theological criticisms towards cultural theories of law that is already resident. That is why Ellul has to spend significant effort to clear up the natural theology of law, before he can really locate all the cultural-historical facts of law, including that of natural law, in human action under the epoch of the Fall (*pp.90-93*). We recognize that this is due to Ellul's dialectical economic method and his basic insight that human culture is under the Fall. That is why the critical dimension has taken precedence in this work.

Moreover, it must be appreciated that there is an intimate link between the critical and the descriptive dimensions, for they belong to the same economic involvement of God with human culture. That is, human law and culture as they are under the Fall can only be revealed and understood as such after revelation has come to judge them and all their theorizations. And these critical judgments themselves are precisely part of the transformation that revelation has brought to human law and culture. In short, what human culture originally is in man is criticized and transformed by what human culture is to become in Christ.

But such theological criticisms of law cannot be advanced without Ellul having first achieved some definitive foundational theological pre-understandings of culture, since these pre-understandings are the basis upon which cultural theories or ideologies can be theologically analyzed. And in the very process of criticizing them, these pre-understandings are fully set out as the definitive or descriptive theological understandings of culture or of its institutions like law.

and rendered "problèmes juridiques actuels" more literally as "actual juridical problems". Compare *pp.139-140* and *pp.108-109* in Ellul, *Le Fondement Theologique du Droit*.

Furthermore, these definitive or descriptive understandings then become normative and serve as the theological foundation of Ellul's normative theo-cultural programme. A truly theocentric cultural-historical concern would not be satisfied with a normative programme which does not arise from the economic action of God, and which would not lead man ultimately to God. Thus this descriptive dimension must simultaneously be the normative theological dimension.

That is why the normative theo-cultural programme comes in at this point. For although we say that human law and culture under the Fall has been transformed in grace, this transformation is not yet consummated. It is still going on and is awaiting the final consummation in the eschaton. In short, what human culture has been in grace is still to come. Thus it is within this interim period when the transformation of human culture has already started but is not yet consummated, that the normative dimension of what culture should be lies. Ellul's suggestions of normative cultural action for human law certainly lies here. However, the human culture that is to result from such cultural action cannot be fully equated with the final human culture that is to come. It can at most correspond to the eschatological one. Thus it can be said that in this work of Ellul the normative dimension is bracketed or circumscribed (*p.99*) by the definitive or descriptive dimension. The work therefore shows an intricate relationship between the descriptive, the critical, and the normative dimensions.

2.5.3) Conclusion - An Economic Foundational Theology of Culture as a Truly Christian Philosophy of Culture

From the above analysis, we can see how Ellul has provided a theological foundation for human law and culture from the economic action of God, which has in turn provided the true epistemology, ontology, teleology, and normativity and axiology for law and culture. In this way, the form of the work has become

what we described as a Christian philosophy of culture. Its aim is to provide a sound Christian (used in a formal, not material, sense) theoretical foundation for an institution or domain of culture. Even though the exposition is founded on the economy of God, its treatment is highly philosophical, expounding law in terms of its own juridical philosophy such as "*judgment-justice-law*"(p.50) or of philosophical theology such as 'grace' and 'nature'. It is organized schematically, in terms of different pairs of dialectical relations. Echoing what we have just discussed above, this certainly has to do with Ellul's cultural-historical concern on law and civilization at large. Thus the work has to be organized around a theme and be analytical, rather than be a narrative account of God's action in the temporal order. Therefore, the work is not expounded as a full-fledged economic theology of culture at the actual level, which has to be a detailed biblical and narrative exposition of God's action on culture in history.²² Thus it will inevitably be looked upon by others, Christians and non-Christians alike, as a kind of philosophy.

Yet it must be realized that this philosophy is founded solidly on theological reality, on the concrete economic reality of God's action, rather than on abstract theoretical speculations. Thus it shows that for a Christian philosophy of culture, only an economic foundation is appropriate. And the exposition of such an economic foundation can be nothing less than a theology, which we may characterize as an economic foundational theology of culture. And because its main thrust lies with the normative dimension, we should also characterize it as a normative theology of culture. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that an economic foundational theology of culture should be the primary form of a Christian philosophy of culture.

2.6) Evaluations and Criticisms

²² We should see such genre of theology of culture expounded by Ellul in the next chapter.

So much for the analyses of this work in terms of its content, method, motives and form. With these aspects clarified, we shall now discuss briefly some of the problems of this work as a theology of culture.

2.6.1) The Lingering Problem of a Creational Foundation of Law and Culture in the Light of Ellul's Doctrine of Creation and Fall

The first and foremost problem of this work of Ellul has to do, expectedly, with the lingering problem of a creational foundation of culture. For although Ellul vehemently dismisses law as founded on a divinized nature because of the exclusive claim of revelation, nevertheless after his theological criticisms he is ready to admit institutions (pp. 76-79) and human rights (pp. 79-84) as constitutive elements of law. Would not such admittance open up again the whole problem of a created order, and cause Ellul's theological foundation of law to become eclectic, as Pannenberg has charged, *"...this procedure was by no means overcome by his concern to find a biblical basis...It would have been better to demonstrate the validity of the theology of ordinances and natural law within the structure of the covenant itself. This is certainly not possible if we proceed only on the basis of the covenant, as Ellul did, and it can succeed only by taking into account the full riches of the history of God's activity, summed up in...the concept of covenant. Only in this framework does it then make sense to formulate basic legislation in terms of Jesus Christ, as Erik Wolf attempted to do..."*²³

To understand this problem one must first remember that Ellul's basic God-man dialectic allows him to take an utterly realistic view not only of theological facts, but of cultural-historical and anthropological facts as well. Thus when he discusses institutions (pp. 76ff), he is discussing them in view of the latest

²³ Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Ethics*, pp. 36-37.

findings concerning them in cultural history and anthropology (pp.76-77). There is no preconceived ideology or theory to distort the findings. That is why he does not deny the anthropological findings of their permanence due to an unduly radical understanding of the Fall.

Moreover, he is able not to fall back on some created order to interpret such findings solely because of this: that he is deducing the theological significance of such cultural-historical findings from a christocentric perspective. That is why Ellul can identify God-given institutions as ^afundamental part of God's original creation (p.77), yet this in no way implies that an original created order remains intact and is discoverable by man with natural reason. Rather, a careful reading of Ellul's exposition of the theological significance of the institutions (and of law) shows that their significance is transferred from the original creation to redemption, and are necessarily connected *"with the death and the lordship of Jesus Christ"* (p.78). Such institutions are preserved by God after the Fall, not to retain a self-sufficient created order, but *"for the fulfillment of the work of salvation."* (p.78) That is why *"these have no value apart from the facts of incarnation and redemption"* (p.78). More significantly, when we examine Ellul's understanding of order in this light (pp.105-109), it is not some kind of created order, but a thoroughly christocentric order (p.109) containing both physical (and so non-juridical, p.106) and social (and so juridical) elements from the original creation. Yet all these elements from the original creation are transformed by Christ to serve man (p.106) and his salvation (p.107). That is why the relationship between law and order is transformed too.²⁴

Pannenberg has underestimated the thoroughness of Ellul's biblical approach. Firstly, Ellul has already insisted that such elements have been singled out *"according to the scripture"* rather than according to human law eclectically

²⁴ For Ellul it is not law that creates order but *"order exists and law formulates it"* (p.106).

(p.76). For Ellul, "if we envisage only human law, we cannot say that these are the only elements." (p.76) Thus it is questionable to characterize such a consistently biblical procedure as eclectic, simply because these elements also feature in other cultural theories of human law, out of the commentator's own predisposition towards such non-biblical theories. It must be pointed out that to accept such elements in a biblical theology does not imply legitimizing non-biblical theologies built on them.

Moreover, Pannenberg has overlooked that Ellul is precisely "*taking into account the full riches of the history of God's activity*", not only on the basis of the covenant, but on the basis of God's economic action in a creation-covenant-parousia time axis centred on Christ. In this way Ellul is more thoroughly biblical and christological than Pannenberg has perceived. If he is true to his own word, Pannenberg must then recognize Ellul's formulation of basic legislation in terms of Christ to make sense!

Yet despite Pannenberg's questionable comments, it cannot be denied that Ellul's christological foundation of law does admit elements of creation recognized also by other cultural theories. The general problem is indeed raised as to what extent elements of creation featuring in other cultural theories should be admitted into a christological foundation of culture, especially when this creation is seen in the light of Christ, in a christological order. Certainly, in the light of Christ, we would not characterize these elements as constituting the 'immanent essence' of culture, as Schüller does,²⁵ nor as implying the theology of ordinances or natural law, as Pannenberg thinks. Now that the theory of natural law and the theology of ordinances have been criticized by Ellul in the light of God's economic action in Christ, is it possible to understand such elements in a christological doctrine of creation as the proper creational

²⁵ Schüller, *Die Herrschaft Christi und das weltliche Recht*, p.187.

foundation of culture?

However, Ellul has not gone all the way to appropriate such elements of other cultural theories. Rather, he goes for revelation only, and is ready to admit only those elements which have been positively stipulated by revelation. Moreover, instead of showing these revealed elements as convergent or continuous with the ones suggested by other cultural theories, he has stressed their discontinuity or uniqueness in the light of revelation. Thus even for the first constitutive element of law stipulated by revelation, which he also purports to have originated from the original creation, namely, institutions, he has stressed its anthropological unexplainability (pp.76-77) rather than its possibility to act as a basis for natural law. Only after indicating this anthropological unexplainability does he top it with a christological explanation. Thus its theological *raison d'être* is not induced from the phenomenon itself but supplied transcendently by revelation, which in Ellul's eyes best explains the anthropological findings.

The same stress on discontinuity happens with the second, and more so with the third element of law. For human rights, the second constitutive element of law that he proposed, Ellul diverges significantly from the usual creation-based natural rights theories, and opts for a covenantal theology of human rights. Thus it cannot be said that Ellul is eclectic, combining both elements of revelation and nature, for in invoking human rights he is surely not invoking a divine endowment in nature. For human justice, the third constitutive element, the stress is wholly on *"the lack of any obvious relationship with the righteousness (in French, justice) of God"* (p.85, cf. p.93), so much so that this is no more than *'a practical criterion'* (p.93), a purely anthropological invention without any creational basis at all (pp.62-63). For Ellul, the fact that this justice is stipulated by revelation does not make it any bit more than a human justice.

Therefore, epistemologically, Ellul's positive revelational approach,²⁶ if used to sieve elements of creation in other cultural theories, seems to end up with minimal results: a minimum of elements of creation positively stipulated by revelation is admitted. This has to do with his general understanding of creation. In this work, it is found that Ellul has developed a strongly relational understanding of creation based on God's continual economic action. That is why he rejects a deistic, mechanistic conception of creation (*p.11*). In this relational understanding, he insists on the *ex nihilo* ontological character of the creation (*p.71*), not only at the beginning, but throughout time. Only God Who creates continually (*p.65*) can give essence or reality to this creation which "*survives only because God acts*" (*p.65*). In this relational and dynamic ontology (*pp.75-76*) Ellul rules out any immanent or substantialist and static ontology. This certainly affects his cultural-historical analysis, causing him to refrain from ascribing any essence or values and norms to any cultural institutions claimed to be based on creation or nature. This means that he has opted for a strong nominalism. That is why he has understood human culture in purely anthropological terms. In the same vein, this anthropological reality cannot be traced back to the original creation. This explains why artificiality is such an important character throughout his analysis of human culture.²⁷

With such strong (though not total) nominalistic understanding of creation, it needs to be asked what sort of realism Ellul has brought into the scheme? Here

²⁶ Ellul has been much more consistent than Holmes would allow. Holmes has also overlooked the theological infrastructure of Ellul's philosophical-theological weaknesses. Thus, for example, his charge of Ellul's voluntaristic nominalism must be understood in the total context of Ellul's biblical realism, as we are doing right here. Yet Holmes is basically right in pinpointing such weaknesses in Ellul, and so right to demand a creational ethic or law from Ellul. Arthur Holmes, "A Philosophical Critique of Ellul on Natural Law," in Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (eds.), *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp.229-250.

²⁷ See, for example, Jacques Ellul, "Nature, Technique, and Artificiality", tr. Katharine Temple, *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 3 (1980), pp.263-283.

Ellul's procedure seems to follow the age-old dictum that the end of reason is the beginning of faith. A strong biblical realism is brought by Ellul to bear on this nominalistic reality. In this biblical realism divine economic and dynamic reality is in dialectic with human cultural reality. The question needs to be asked whether this biblical realism is christological and incarnational enough to overcome the nominalism.

At this point we must highlight the theological agnosticism of the Fall in this biblical realism of Ellul. It must first be recognized that this agnosticism is spelt out in response to the Gnosticism of natural theology in the light of revelation (p.62). In this agnosticism, the Fall does not only intervene between the original creation and human culture now, thereby rendering natural theology invalid, it also intervenes between the original creation and revelation, so that even under Christ's redemption we cannot go back to the original creation epistemologically and ontologically, because the Fall is not totally done away with even in the redemption. To put it in temporal terms, Ellul still understands creation in the epoch of the Fall, not the epoch of redemption. Or, putting it ontologically, the extent of the christological reality in the creation that we can discover is still limited by the Fall.

What results is a weakness in Ellul's formulation of the creation-covenant-parousia time axis. Ellul has already gone quite far in formulating this understanding of time in God. He is also aware that our intelligence is conditioned by time to conceive of the relationship between the covenant and the final judgment as linear (p.99). Yet his exposition still falls short of expounding the eternal character of the relationship in terms of the cotemporality of time in God. Here his strong doctrine of the Fall has certainly driven a wedge into this creation-covenant-parousia time axis, resulting in a discontinuity in his understanding of the relation between creation and covenant. For Ellul, there is

no coterporality²⁸ and ontological interpenetration between creation and covenant. Naturally, there is also no epistemological revelation^{thrown} by the covenant on creation, which should go a long way towards understanding the original creation.²⁹ Thus it can be expected that the creation-covenant-parousia time axis is no longer balanced. It is, in actuality, truncated at the origin and tilts towards the covenant-parousia side, with the creation origin being more or less defunct. The covenant, rather than the creation, is seen as the departure point for law (pp.93,94,99). The overall result is that although Ellul strives for a thoroughly biblical, revelational and christological realism, this realism is still not christological and incarnational enough. Thus finally he does not land on a creational realism which can thoroughly overcome the strong nominalism of his cultural-historical analysis, nor can such biblical christological realism widen its field to appropriate elements of other cultural theories and decode their implicit creational foundations.

2.6.2) The Unfinished Business of Spelling out the Content of Law in the Light of God's Revelation

The refusal to appropriate elements of other cultural theories does not necessarily jeopardize a positive normative theo-cultural programme. At the end of the work Ellul has indicated his intention to further investigate the content of divine law as stipulated by revelation. And it is his intention to continue the dialogue between this theological understanding of law's content and actual juridical problems. In the case of law, even a sole attention to revelation should

²⁸ That is why there is no 'already' dimension in his understanding of the eschaton, but only the 'not yet'.

²⁹ It is noteworthy that although Ellul is reputed to be influenced by Barth, he seems not to be aware of the profound understanding of the ontological interpenetration between creation and covenant which has been expounded by Barth at around this time in his *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/1, Section 41, pp.42ff.

yield substantial content for a normative theo-cultural programme of law. This is an important step in expanding the descriptive-normative theological dimension of this cultural institution. It is regrettable that Ellul has not carried out his intention, probably because later he was no longer convinced of such^a positive theo-cultural programme, and has been content to limit himself in providing theo-cultural criticisms on the realm of law.³⁰

2.6.3) The Failure to Provide Realistic Theological Norms and Values to Evaluate Cultural-historical Laws

However, Ellul does not thus invalidate human law by his theo-cultural criticisms. Rather, his intention is to validate it in the light of revelation, for we have indicated that he considers law to be essential in ordering human relations (*pp.109-111*) and formulating order (*pp.105-109*). Thus he has already answered those critics who have charged him with illegitimately taking Old Testament law to be paradigmatic for all cultures³¹. Surely, he points to God's law's superiority

³⁰ See Jacques Ellul, "Mirror of These Ten Years", tr. Cecelia Gaul Kings, *Christian Century*, vol. 87, no. 7 (18 Feb., 1970), pp. 200-204.

For Ellul's more important theo-cultural criticisms on the law scene, see, for example: "Christianisme et droit: Recherches américaines", *Archives de Philosophie du Droit*, no. 5 (1960), pp. 27-35;

"Réalité sociale et théologie du droit", in Thomas Würtenberger (ed.), *Existenz und Ordnung: Festschrift für Erik Wolf*, (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1962), pp. 36-61; and

"L'Irréductibilité du droit à une théologie de l'histoire".

For his theological ethics towards law, see:

"Propositions concerning the Christian Attitude toward Law", tr. Jacques Bossière, *Oklahoma Law Review*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Feb., 1959), pp. 134-146. In this English translation of his "Propositions concernant l'attitude chrétienne envers le droit", *Foi et Vie*, vol. 58, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1959), pp. 32-43, Ellul has added a section on "The Relation between the Church and the World", in which he has characterized their relation as one of tension, and has explicitly denied the possibility of creating a 'Christian society', indeed a 'Christendom'. This also means that he has backtracked from spelling out theological understanding of the content of law and order, but is content to stress Christian responsibility towards secular law.

³¹ See François Guisan, "Book Review: Le Fondement Theologique du Droit", *Verbum Caro*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Aug. 1947), pp. 130-136.

to any other law (p.115). Yet he points out that in God's act of judging man according to human law (p.95), God has juridically validated human law and made His own law universal, "*The law of God applies to all nations because God is the judge of all nations*" (p.120).

Yet there is a problem in his way of validating human law. For he only validates the totality of law (p.98, "*our whole law receives its validity*") through a rather formal consideration of its being appropriated and applied by God, of its justice being adopted by Him in the eschaton (pp.94-98). The problem of this procedure is that no material norm and value of divine justice has further been expounded, so much so that we are left with '*no ultimate criterion of justice*' to discriminate the good human laws from the bad ones. The prerogative of discrimination, for Ellul, belongs to God (p.98). In the light of his strong understanding of God's transcendence (pp.39-40, p.95), "*it is futile to inquire to what kind of justice*" the Sermon on the Mount promise refers (p.98).

What results is an inability to produce some middle axioms, as proposed by Palma³² to judge and evaluate individual statutes and ordinances, or to evaluate different cultural-historical laws, which are so essential for the cultural transformation of existing laws. Take the example of natural law, to which Ellul has paid so much attention. As Ellul has brought natural law into theological dialogue with revelation, he has given it a place more positive than an exclusively dogmatic exposition of law will do. He has found natural law to raise the theological question of law (which is also the basic question of all institutions of culture) which only revelation can answer. Yet it may be asked whether further theological evaluations can be extended to it. For one, Ellul has extended little

³² Robert J. Palma, *Karl Barth's Theology of Culture: The Freedom of Culture for the Praise of God*, (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick, 1983), p.2.

theological criticism towards sacred law and technical law in this work.³³ Certainly he thinks that in criticizing natural law he has already criticized them all (and all of human culture), for they all have one theological intention in common, namely, to seek the autonomy of man from God. Yet there are still other features peculiar to each type of law which must be separately evaluated.

In the case of natural law, its rise and development in western cultural history should be theologically evaluated in greater detail, especially since Ellul has arrived at a creation-covenant-parousia time axis which should bracket the development of human law and culture in history. The question needs to be asked whether a natural law that has developed in a Christian monotheism is really not much different from a natural law developed in an Islamic monotheism, or from a natural law developed in an Oriental pantheism. It must also be asked as to what extent the Greek understanding of nature in western natural law is modified by Christian monotheism and Christian understanding of creation.

For a Chinese Christian, the western concept of nature is so peculiar that the concept of universal natural right can arise from it, but not from a Chinese understanding of nature. Moreover, when Ellul is contending for the autonomy of law from the state, this has actually happened in western legal history, especially in Britain and America. Should not this fact be positively evaluated, and the theological motive force which gave rise to it be pointed out? To be sure, in view of Ellul's unfinished business of spelling out the content of divine law, we cannot demand too much of this work here. Yet it seems that the basic lack of positive evaluations does not lie with the lack of content, but with the problem we have just analyzed. Ellul has not been able to extend the range and scope of

³³ But see his discussion on the technicization of law in *pp.31-33*, and in his *Technological Society*, tr. John Wilkinson, (New York: Knopf, 1964, original French edition 1954), pp.291-300. For his other theological criticism on sacred law, see his "Loi et sacré, droit et divin: De la loi sacré au droit divin", *Archivio di Filosofia* (Padua), nos. 2-3 (1974), pp. 179-199.

his theological evaluations and appropriations of human cultural elements because of the deficiencies in his revelational approach which, arising from a strong understanding of God's transcendence, causes his understanding of divine norms and values to become too transcendent to be helpful in guiding human cultural endeavour in this life. In fact, such transcendental emphasis has rendered divine norms and values to be less christologically and incarnationally realistic than they should be.

2.6.4) The Circumscribing of the Role of Law and Culture under Ellul's Transcendental Doctrines of God and Redemption

Without the guidance of divine norms and values, the conducting of law by man is reduced back to a purely human, and thus secular, undertaking (p.99). Although Ellul has bracketed law between the covenant and parousia (pp.94,99), his divine transcendentalism has meant that temporally speaking he has eschatologized the fulfillment of law. This further means that he has drawn a distinction between the eschaton and the covenant. Thus although "*God's final judgment is identical with the covenant*", the covenant only "*expresses itself in relative terms which cloak its meaning*" (p.99). In this relativization of the covenant, man can only rely on his own judgment to conduct law in the course of history, where even the meaning of the covenant is cloaked, while the meaning of the creation and the eschaton are even more severely relegated to the past and to the future.

Furthermore, although Ellul has advocated a double attitude toward law (pp.100ff), it seems that he has not supplied all the reasons for it. The negative side of this double attitude, i.e., the avoidance of conformism, of unqualified handing over of ourselves to law, can be easily comprehended because "*law will have to submit to final judgment*" (p.100). However, the positive side, namely,

that law should reign over anarchism and violence, that law should not be distorted by personal interest and the priority of person or class, that we must become more and more rigorous with regard to law, all these have not been upheld by a norm of divine justice.

Surely, Ellul has advocated a pragmatic human justice in the conduct of law (*pp.85-94*). We can also appreciate his well-meaning effort to prevent law from becoming "*normative for the life of the soul and the spirit*" (*p.105*). This amounts to saying that law cannot be normative for the gospel. But there is a nagging doubt whether this can really hold, especially because Ellul consistently denies any "*way of relating this organizing justice to the righteousness of God*" (*p.93*). When man comes to seek justice from the court, surely he is not just seeking pragmatic justice, but a transcendental and eternal justice which can vindicate his righteousness! Even human justice cannot be purely formal as Ellul advocates (*pp.92-93*), but must be substantial. Therefore, it is doubtful that revelation, after giving law its true foundation and validity, would just circumscribe the same validity, and confine the function of law to that of secularity (*p.99*). One must ask whether this view of Ellul is not reinforcing the secularization of law and culture, and is not unproductive at all in spelling out the function of law.

Ellul's divine transcendentalism does not only limit the function of law to that of secularity, it also confines the role of law to that of preservation. Surely, he has qualified this role eschatologically, as preservation of the world for judgment. However, it must still be asked whether such role of law is positive and redemptive enough. Certainly, Ellul wants to stress that the role of law is not to bring in the kingdom. But he seems not to be aware that the kingdom can break in the present in the form of a cultural-historical development of law. And that this development would actualize in the form of Christian action based on

their perception of the demand of divine justice for the present law.³⁴

Moreover, he seems not to be aware that to preserve the world, in the epoch of the Fall which he so often reminds us, effectively means deliverance of the poor (p.118) and the oppressed from alien powers. Therefore, this purpose invariably carries redemptive overtones. This means that a strong understanding of the Fall mandates a doctrine of redemption. Thus in the light of the doctrine of redemption law's role cannot be formulated with reference only to the doctrine of creation and Fall. Surely, Ellul has tried to give law a redemptive role in its signification (pp.114-119). But it needs to be asked whether such a role is positively redemptive enough, for here again the signification is eschatological, pointing to a future and transcendental judgment, not pointing to a divine justice that has been incarnated in the world. Moreover, such significations are not well correlated with the purpose of the content of law, which is totally secular, thus rendering such significations superfluous. On the other hand, such significations also do not become imperatives for law and cannot usher in a more positive transformation of law (and culture) in the present. And, most significantly, one must ask, without the divine justice explicitly and positively made known and law explicitly founded on it, how can this signification function be readily appreciated by man?

In fact, the whole problem we have set out here can be readily solved if Ellul would go for a more christological and incarnational understanding of law and justice. In this understanding, divine justice can be seen as meeting human justice in Jesus Christ, and is therefore made manifest before man. This is the very essence of the gospel expounded by Paul (Romans 3:21-22). To arrive at this

³⁴ Ellul has said something diametrically opposite in spirit to what we have just said, "...we are not even capable of knowing what part of our law and our present institutions history will retain." (p.98) He further uses this incapability "of anticipating the judgment of history rendered by men" (p.98) to argue for our incapability to anticipate God's judgment.

positive divine justice, one needs to follow closely the incarnation of Christ, and its implications for the incarnation of divine justice on earth. Here, the legal event of the trial of Jesus is of paramount significance, as Niebuhr has commented.³⁵ Regrettably, throughout his exposition, this event has not captured Ellul's attention as it should. Indeed, at several occasions, Ellul has touched on the right christological key to solving this mystery of divine justice.³⁶ If he had grasped them, he might come to a more positive exposition of divine justice on earth, and overcome the divine transcendentalism which thwarted this significant theological work of law at its most crucial point.

³⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, (London: Nisbet, 1938), p.x.

³⁶ In p.93 Ellul says, "*We have no way of relating this organizing justice to the righteousness of God....But God himself establishes this relationship, starting with his own righteousness and descending to the level of this organizing justice.*" Regrettably, he does not go on to expound Christ's incarnation, who is the descending of this divine righteousness.

In p.95, he says, "*God does not adopt absolute justice, but the justice of the man before him.*" Here he forgets that '*the man*' is foremostly Jesus Christ, whose justice God adopts on behalf of all men.

In p.115, he says, "*But man still faces the question of justice....Only the revelation in Jesus Christ provides an answer in the light of the fulfillment of God's righteousness.*" Once again he seems not to be aware of the positive implications of his own words.

Chapter 3) God's Election of Human Culture

- Ellul's Descriptive Economic Theology of Culture in the Symbol of the City

3.1) Introductory Considerations - Ellul's Socio-cultural and Theological Concern for the City and Technique

We have examined in detail Ellul's theological work on law, which provides Ellul with a normative theological foundation for law as well as for culture. We have also seen that Ellul has come to some preliminary critical and descriptive-normative theological understanding of culture through this work. But we have also seen that Ellul has not spelt out a full narrative description of God's dealing with human culture in history, especially in biblical history. The definitive or descriptive theological understanding of culture as posed in Palma's tripartite scheme is prominently missing in this preliminary work of Ellul. To this we must turn to Ellul's most important theological work--*The Meaning of the City*¹.

In the intervening years between Ellul's theological works on law and the city, Ellul did not pursue much further his theological and juridical studies on the problem of law. Rather, he pursued massive cultural-historical studies on western institutions,² and was also active in political and ecclesiastical activities.

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, tr. Dennis Pardee, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970). The original French edition, *Sans Feu ni Lieu: Signification biblique de la Grande Ville*, was formally published in 1975 by Paris: Gallimard, but the text (p.297) indicated that at least the last chapter was written as early as the Christmas of 1947. Surely, many of Ellul's important ideas was already in place when he wrote the articles "La Bible et la ville", *Foi et Vie*, vol. 48, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1950), pp. 4-19, and "Urbanisme et théologie biblique", *Dieu Vivant*, no. 16 (1950), pp.109-123.

² See Ellul's massive *Historie des Institutions*, 5 vols., (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1st édition, 1956-62, 10th edition, 1989).

He even served once as the deputy mayor of the city of Bordeaux.³ However, his main reputation grew from his penetrating socio-cultural studies on the modern society, especially in his trilogy: *The Technological Society*, *Propaganda*, and *The Political Illusion*.⁴ In this trilogy he was intensively engaged with the problems he regarded as central to modern western society, namely, the problem of modern technique⁵.

As we have indicated in the previous chapter, Ellul has posited a sharp distinction between fact and theory, between cultural-historical facts and their interpretations. This does not mean that Ellul would not try to interpret socio-cultural phenomena and draw out their socio-cultural significance. For Ellul such socio-cultural interpretations still belong to the elucidation of higher order socio-cultural facts. It is as socio-cultural fact that he describes technical phenomena. However, the fact-theory distinction also means that he absolutely refuses to draw out theological meaning (in French, 'signification') from such socio-cultural descriptions.

It is in this context that Ellul wrote *The Meaning of the City*, which he has

³ Joyce M. Hanks, *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, (London and Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press, 1984), p.xii.

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, tr. John Wilkinson, (New York: Knopf, 1964, original French edition 1954); *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, tr. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner, (New York: Knopf, 1965, original French edition 1962); and *The Political Illusion*, tr. Konrad Kellen, (New York: Knopf, 1967, original French edition 1965).

⁵ We characterize here the problem as that of modern technique rather than that of modern technology in accordance with the terminology and meaning of the term intended by Ellul. As we shall make clear in our next chapter, Ellul's description of the whole range of phenomena covered by the French term 'la technique' not only indicates technological phenomena, but also all technical phenomena. For simplicity's sake we shall hereafter characterize them as technical phenomena.

indicated explicitly as the theological counterpart to *The Technological Society*.⁶ Herein he searches for the theological meaning of technical phenomena from a totally different source, namely, biblical revelation.⁷ It is easy to imagine that this former deputy mayor of Bordeaux, who has since his early years been involved in voluntary works for urban youth⁸, would very much have the city in mind in his socio-cultural analysis of modern civilization, although he is not an urban sociologist. However, it must be recognized that Ellul chose the city as a focus for theological study, more out of the inner compulsion of biblical revelation, than out of a concern arising out of personal experience.

Certainly, this study is a direct response to his concern for encouraging Christian understanding of and action in the world. In the years intervening between his theological works on law and on the city, he increasingly found that it was no longer possible to find ethical solutions to the problems of modern civilization. Thus he could no longer continue the project he has indicated in *The Theological Foundation of Law*.⁹ In order to have a more profound understanding of the spiritual or theological significance lying behind the technical phenomena, he must search for a deeper theology beyond his sociology. He must resort to a revelatory source.

3.2) Analysis of the Work's Content - Theological Significance

⁶ Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on our Age*, ed. William H. Vanderburg, tr. Joachim Neugroschel, (New York: Seabury, 1981), p.59.

⁷ We qualify revelation as biblical only to highlight in the present context of discussion that this revelation is from the Bible. This does not imply that revelation is ultimately biblical or propositional, rather than christological, as Fundamentalism would suppose.

⁸ Jacques Ellul and Yves Charrier, *Jeunesse Délinquante: Des blousons noirs aux hippies*, (Nantes: Editions de l'AREFPPI, 1985, first edition 1971).

⁹ Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, pp. 139-140. See also our Section 2.5.2.2.

and Theo-cultural Insights

3.2.1) Introductory Observations

When we come to this work we find many features in common with his previous work on law. The work is a more thorough biblical-theological exposition. The christological character is strong. The exposition again shows Ellul's theological realism. It is based on the whole history of God's economic action in Christ. Again there is a dialectical confrontation between God's work and man's. And in Christ this dialectic has a strong incarnational character, with divine action incarnating in human action in Christ.

However, we must also emphasize the difference between this work and the previous one. The first point of difference is that between the city and law. The city obviously does not claim to represent a divine natural order as natural law does. She appears as exclusively human work. Nor does the city provide a normative framework to structure a culture or civilization as law does. In this case a theology of the city does not encapsulate the foundational problems of culture as a theology of law does. Therefore, it is quite beside the point to look for further elaborations on the theological foundation of culture. Rather, since the city is the most prominent physical manifestation of 'civilization' it conveniently provides the theatre in which God's economic dealing with human civilization takes place. Therefore, this is a work dealing more with the actual dimensions of culture, of the cultural-historical, the social and the power dimensions as such.

Secondly, with the technical phenomena already elucidated in an exclusively socio-cultural work, namely, *The Technological Society*, the dialectical confrontation between divine facts and human facts is carried out in a limited, or, focussed scope. Here the dialectical confrontation is elucidated mainly within the confines of biblical revelation. The human facts which are confronted are not the

socio-cultural facts of modern technical civilization, but those of human acts concerning the city within biblical history. Certainly, Ellul rejects a strict dichotomy between the human facts contained in the Bible and those occurring in modern civilization, for he sees no discontinuities between human work within the salvation history in the Bible, and human work within modern civilization. For him, what makes the salvation history of the Bible different is the theological truths contained in its divine facts, which can bring out and transform the realities of human socio-cultural acts both in the Bible and in the present time.

Thirdly, because of the limited scope of this dialectical confrontation, the city has acquired a special status as a symbol. What she symbolizes is of utter importance for understanding this work. Surely, as a point of departure Ellul takes her as the supreme symbol of technical phenomena. Ellul can do this because he has a more general conception of the city as symbolizing human work. As an extension of this symbolization the city as the supreme product of human work also symbolizes human culture or civilization (*p.72*)¹⁰, especially in her material aspect as a humanly constructed 'world'. Furthermore, the history of the city symbolizes human history as a whole, and the location of the city symbolizes the site of human society or community. Again, as the supreme product of human work the city also symbolizes man's power and his quest for power, and, concomitantly, his quest for human autonomy. Moreover, because of its materialistic nature external to man with its concomitant spirit it can also come to symbolize transhuman realities like principalities and powers. Thus the city is a potent symbol for culture or civilization as a whole. Certainly, as Ellul's exposition shows, this symbolic richness arises directly out of the way Bible

¹⁰ Hereafter all the page numbers and quotations in *italic* form in the main text and the footnotes of this chapter refer to this work of Ellul, namely, *The Meaning of the City*.

narrates her history¹¹, and therefore is something law taken as a symbol cannot achieve, although what Ellul has elucidated for law can also be applied to culture at large.

Fourthly, as a particularly rich symbol, the multiple symbolizations of the city do not exclude each other because they are correlated realities. Ellul's theology of the city thus elucidates a number of theologies, namely, those of technique, of human work, of human culture, of history, of society, and of power. Among these theologies, however, we would contend that the theology of culture is the most prominent, for this is the subject Ellul claimed to be dealing with in the preface(p.xviii) of the book. More significantly, we understand that technique is for Ellul the central feature of modern civilization, and in choosing the city as the focus of theological investigation he is spelling out a definitive theology of culture to answer this central problem. However, we must immediately add that this theology of culture is to be characterized as a theology of history, or, as Ellul has understood, a theology of culture *"in history and eternity"* (p.xviii), for the two dimensions of culture and history cannot really be separated given the economic character of his theology. With the above understanding it becomes clear why Ellul, in tackling the problem of technique, did not concentrate on those biblical passages dealing directly with human technical operations, e.g. Numbers Ch.1 & Ch.26, 1 Chronicles Ch.21. For Ellul has a broader understanding of technique as the central part of a wider problem, namely, that of human culture as a whole.

The whole exposition is, therefore, like a concerto with several subsidiary themes (society, power, technique) running alongside the main theme, i.e., culture. The city is the title of the concerto, and the progression of the concerto

¹¹ See p.173 note 3, *"the city (as myth) designates much beyond herself, although it is nevertheless the city."*

signifying the time, i.e., the historical dimension of the main theme. Thus our analysis of the work will not take the schematic form we adopted in the previous chapter. We shall not proceed to unravel the various philosophical-theological aspects of the theological foundation (i.e., grace) underlying the work. Instead, we shall try to show, according to the narrative flow of the work, how the general theological movements of man moving away from God, and of God moving towards man, have been able to throw light on human culture and God's dealing with it, in terms of the biblical symbol of the city. In our detailed analysis we shall also touch on all the major dogmatic loci, showing their significance for a theology of culture.

3.2.2) The Theological Intention of the City Builders

In *Chapter One: The Builders* Ellul expounds the human intention of the city builders, from Cain through Nimrod to the builders of Babel and then the Israelites, cumulating in the Israelite monarchs. Through a detailed exposition he has shown that man's city-building has a theological dimension, that the psychology of man after the Fall was the origin of man's act of city building (pp.4-5). It is in this psychology that Cain's act of city-building and his act of son-bearing were of essentially similar motive. Ellul points out that in Cain the city had her origin in sin, in a fallen state following God's curse, a state without God, thus a state of perpetual searching for God's presence (p.4).

In such exposition the meaning of the city lay initially with man. This human meaning of the city, i.e., the symbolic meaning man attributed to the city in his act of building, has been laid bare. It is in this meaning that the origin of the city also signifies the origin of civilization (p.14, or the world in the theological sense, cf. pp.54 & 59). The city, as seen by her builders, signifies power, especially the power of technique, the power of other cultural institutions

such as economy or politics, and so the power of human culture or civilization as a whole (p.13). She is also the symbol of human work. More importantly, Ellul also draws out the theological significance of this human meaning. The city did not arise as civilization, as technique, as power or as human work in response to the horizontal man to man or man to nature relations. The human meaning of the city has its origin in the vertical God-man relational context. If the city is the origin of civilization, this is not just a civilization in response to nature (e.g. for security from beasts), or to other civilizations (e.g. for defence). It is rather man's own creation to replace God's (pp.5 & 60), indeed man's counter-creation to God's creation. Thus it necessarily bends God's creation by dominating over nature (p.14) and killing the country (p.8). If the city is human power she is precisely human power seeking glorification in himself (p.14). Thus Ellul shows that in the case of Babel man also tried to create truth in the city (p.19) and in the process to make himself God. Thus city-building, whose primary theological significance was a human remedy to replace God's grace after the Fall (p.6), to find man's own security (p.5), had become man's predominant form of opposition to God (p.39). It excludes God from His creation, in order to make man himself God.

This theological significance was shown clearly in Ellul's exposition of the relation between the chosen people and the city, for the chosen people and their Kings were first enslaved and then forced and finally lured into city-building. In so doing the city shows up one further theological character as a kind of necessity (pp.23-38).

3.2.3) God's Curse on the City

However, in *Chapter Two: Thunder over the City*, Ellul points out that God's act of grace is already breaking through into the city: firstly in His curse

on the city. These curses of God have a double function -- they act as judgement as well as signs of God's mercy. And they also nullify the meaning man attributes to their cities. Here we can even say that God's curse is His revelation on the city. For by the curse the city is revealed to be a transhuman reality, a power external to man. She is a spiritual power to do with angels (p.45), powers (p.46), and demons (p.52), as removed from man's power (p.47). She aligns with all the powers of human culture -- state, money, violence and war. Therefore the city is not only man's opposition to God. She opposes God by herself (p.52). She acts as idol, as the new sacred for man. And as God's act from the very beginning, these curses have entered into the very being of the city, the very fabric of her history (p.60).¹²

In taking up the cases of Nineveh and Sodom, Ellul provides an explication of the relationship between God's judgement and man's decision in connection with the city. Thus he sees that "*God includes in the fact of his judgement even the decision man is yet to make*" (p.63). That means man's decision has been prophetically included in God's judgment. Therefore, in the case of God's curse on the city, man has to decide whether he will remain in solidarity with the city (p.64). The people of Sodom were destroyed because they simply remained in a solidarity of sin with the city, while Nineveh was spared and even acted as the symbolic city of repentance. In this prophecy, God in fact changes the meaning of man's solidarity with the city from the solidarity of sin to that of righteousness. Here, Ellul uses the case of God's command to His people in Babylon to bring out the full meaning of God's grace with regard to this relationship between man and his city -- His people is forbidden to be the builder, for to build this city under God is all the more abominable as conscious rejection of the true God (p.83), yet they are called to be inhabitants in the city in order

¹² In fact, Ellul has already touched on these aspects of God's mercy when dealing with Babel and Nineveh in *Chapter One* (pp.15-23).

to preserve her by virtue of their solidarity with her. This is the first normative implication Ellul draws for God's people with regard to His curse on the city.¹³

3.2.4) Significance - Human culture and the Doctrines of Man and of Creation

So far we have delineated part of this narrative exposition of God's dealing with the human city. Herein we can see that Ellul has put human culture in the context of the God-man dialectic. The significance of this procedure is that it has opened up the doctrine of revelation to human culture. For in the God-man dialectic God's revelation is shown to shed light on all of man's cultural work, including the human city, which we usually think to have little to do with man and his salvation. Dogmatic theology usually neglects these aspects of human culture, and abandons the task of understanding them to other human sciences.

From this revelatory starting point, Ellul has shown that human culture is deeply related to the doctrine of man. It shows the deep link between man and his work, that humanity is deeply affected by the nature of man's work. It also reveals what man's true situation in sin has been in the cultural-historical realities of the city. It shows that the ultimate reality of human sin lies not in the horizontal realities of the world but in the vertical reality of the God-man dialectic. For the horizontal realities of human culture in fact arise from the vertical reality of the God-man dialectic.

This God-man dialectic further exposes the deeply spiritual character of

¹³ Yet Ellul points out that this inhabitation in the city cannot be total or unconditional. She awaits the eschatological separation. What God's people have to do in the city is not to participate fully in the sins of the city but to live as witnesses bearing the Word of God (p.76), to pray (p.77), to work for good of the Word of God, to wait (p.78), and lastly, to leave as a sign proclaiming God's Word (pp.78-82).

the city, this most materialistic creation of man (p.116) . More than anyone can imagine, this materialistic civilization is shown to affect or, indeed, determine the spiritual destiny of man. Thus Ellul has also shown that human culture is related to the doctrine of creation, but not in a positive sense, certainly not in the sense that the human city is based positively on creation, or the creation mandate, or the creative impulse of man as a creature. Rather, she is only to be understood as a human counter-creation with an intention to counter the creation of God. In this characterization Ellul has pinpointed the city's origin as lying exclusively with man, rather than with God, as Augustine in his neo-Platonic perspective has theorized.¹⁴ Gone is the notion of an eternal city of God in heaven with man's city as her imperfect or corrupted human counterpart. The city in herself is a novel human creation which has not had a heavenly prototype.

3.2.5) God's Election of the City in Grace - The Ultimate Source of Culture's Transformation in God's Election of Human Culture as Part of His Election of Man and Human Work

However, the foremost theological insight on culture comes from the doctrine of election. This has to do with the problem of cultural transformation or change. In its biblical-christological exposition the work has decidedly located the ultimate source of culture's transformation in the doctrine of God's election. This is theologically significant, for it has shown that human culture and human work have a place in God's election of man. Cultural-historically speaking, this is even more significant, for it has located the certainty of cultural change in the sovereign decision of God. From this sovereign decision there arises a power and dynamic of cultural change that is profoundly redemptive, that is the ground of

¹⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, tr. Marcus Dods, (New York: The Modern Library, 1950).

hope for all human cultural endeavour of change.¹⁵

This profound doctrine of election for culture is what we are now going to examine.

If even God's curse is an act of grace on the city, then in *Chapter Three: Long We Wait for the Coming of the Dawn* Ellul goes on to expound a further act of God's grace on the city. This is more emphatically an act of grace because it is an act in preparation for Christ. This act is God's election of the city. In the power of this election the theological meaning of the city is again changed by God.

Firstly, in the case of Babylon God elected the city as an instrument of punishment for the chosen people (p.88). Ellul points out that even in this negative act of judgement, God is including the city in the realm of grace. God shows a sign of grace to the city by turning the city's role to His use. Even though the role of the city is retained, her theological meaning is changed (p.93).

Secondly, God instituted cities of refuge for people to escape the revenge blood (p.90). Here, with characteristically sharp eyes Ellul delineates the expiatory motive of God's move, and points out God's reversal of the meaning of the city since Cain (p.93). What was built as a result of murder and death is now set aside as an instrument for preservation. If God's curse has revealed the spiritual power of the city, here God's reversal transforms the spiritual power of the city (p.92). Moreover, Ellul points out the relation between these cities and the high priest, which is the christological significance of this sign.

However, nowhere is God's election of the city more evident as an act of

¹⁵ For an exposition of this power and dynamic of change in history coming out of the movement of God's revelation in Christ, see Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, tr. George W. Schreiner (New York: Seabury, 1977, original French edition 1975).

grace than in the case of Jerusalem. Moreover, this election by God of Jerusalem in response to David's election clearly shows the dialectic between God's decision and man's, between God's act and man's act. God's election is no longer seen as a contradiction to man's decision, but as the very inclusion and endorsement of it. This election, therefore, is the ultimate ontological determination of the being and meaning of the city and human culture.

On this basis Ellul has pointed out the singular importance of God's election of Jerusalem for the history of the city. Due to the solidarity of all cities Jerusalem is put at a crossroad situation (*pp.97-98*), from bearing man's mark (*p.98*) to entering into a new covenant of grace (*p.100*). In this way all cities are saved in Jerusalem (*p.100*). For in Jerusalem's election, God meets man on his own ground, and meets Satan and his spiritual powers where they are (*p.101*). In this act of adoption (*p.102*), God is introducing his theonomy and his power into the city and her history (*p.102*). God is Himself taking the role of man as builder (*p.103*), and taking the role of the city as wall to protect man. Moreover, in His election through the Word of God, the city is bound to the Word of God (*p.108*), to witness as a sign of promise of the Word of God (*p.107*). In so doing God's act replaces man's act, reverses it and finally transcends it.

3.2.6) God's Election of the City in Christ

- Christ's Significance for Human City and Culture

Thus the doctrine of election is central indeed in this work of Ellul. Jerusalem is important indeed for all human cities and cultures. However, their importance cannot be compared to that of Jesus Christ and, dogmatically, to Christology. When Ellul comes to consider Christ's crucial importance for the city in *Chapter Four: Jesus Christ*, he has brought the doctrine of election to its christological conclusion. God's election of man and his cultural work happens

decisively in Jesus Christ. The remarkable thing is that he has thus linked a most materialistic entity, namely, the city, with a most personal being, Jesus Christ. This is the most profound linking of culture and man that man can ever conceive.

In this chapter, God's replacement, reversal and transformation of man's act comes to a head in Jesus Christ. The central point is not just that God adopts man's work, but He really acts for man as man. This is only possible in the incarnation. In expounding Christ's significance, Ellul places his stress on the vicarious humanity of Christ and his work of substitution for man and the city. What we have here is that Christ recapitulates all of God's acts in relation to the city, namely, curse and judgement on, election of and substitution for the city. In all these recapitulations Christ acts in his vicarious humanity as man. This intensifies the meaning, the seriousness, and the efficacy of these divine acts. On the other hand, Christ repeats man's position in relation to the city and in the process reverses the effects the city has on man throughout history.

To begin with, Christ's fulfillment of, judgement and curse on the city reveal the city's nature as spiritual being (*p.114*), and her theological significance for man (*p.114*). Christ not only judges by words but by deeds, and in these judgements Christ enters into conflicts with the power of the city (*p.118*). In the process He shows her to be an expression of the spirit of power, as spiritual and material power opposing God's power and God's order (*p.119*), as means of separation between man and God (*p.119*). In so doing he fulfilled the prophetic office in relation to the city through revealing her nature.

What is more important is Christ's repetition of the plight of man in relation to the city (*p.121*). Firstly he underwent all the temptations of man including temptation by the city. Secondly he detached himself from the city as a reversal of Cain's act. He willingly accepted the plight of wandering and so

bore Cain's curse (p.121). He entered into man's slavery (p.122), a slavery of his body (p.122), and took all of God's curses (p.122) on himself. Thus Christ becomes the victim (p.123) who experienced the totality of ^{the} human condition (p.123), the fullness of human life (p.124), even up to death and expulsion without the protection and security provided by the city. The person of Christ becomes stranger to the world of the city (p.124). He did not participate in this work of man (p.124) and in the process also separates man from this work.¹⁶ Thus Christ fulfilled the priestly office in relation to man's plight in the city.

In this connection Ellul has an excellent theo-social analysis of the condition of '*the crowd*'--'*the multitude*'--who represent the dominant form of man's social life in the city (pp.124-135). He stresses the impersonal (p.127), inhuman, indeed, inhuman quality of life in the city, the loss of the individual and his concomitant lawlessness (p.127). Moreover, he points out Christ's restoration of personhood and individuality to man in the city, for they are no longer related to the city but to Christ. Thus Christ by his own vicarious suffering (p.128), through a wonderful exchange (p.128), becomes the saviour, Lord and Messiah of man in the city. He becomes the telos of the crowd. Thus by becoming scapegoat, as prey of demons in the desert, he conquers powers, thrones and dominions. Here at the end of fulfilling his priestly office Christ is beginning to assume the kingly office as Christ the Lord. Therefore, as persons in communion with Christ (p.133) we are given again the freedom both to leave the city and to return to her in a new manner.

Finally, Christ's supreme work for the city is substitution for Jerusalem. Here Ellul plumbs the depth of the adoption of man and his work by God in Christ. For him, the depth of this adoption lies in the incarnation, which is so profound that "*we can no longer point out a distinct place where God begins and*

¹⁶ This separation is particularly evident in the case of Nineveh (p.134).

man ends" (p.136). Here we must point out that for Ellul man's work and its products are very much part of his flesh, and are thus touched on by the incarnation (p.137). Thus Christ is the one whole man who fulfilled all that Jerusalem stood for (p.135). He is the kingdom, the cornerstone, the scandal against the nations, and he is the house of God and the temple of God. In him there is full substitution for the history of the nation and the history of the city, which means all the cultural histories of man. In this substitution Jerusalem is completely desacralized, so much so that Jerusalem becomes Babylon (p.140).

3.2.7) Significance - Christology and the Meaning of Christ's Incarnation for Culture - The Lordship of Christ and the Autonomy of Man in Culture

Christology is the central dogmatic focus in this work of Ellul. It informs all the other dogmatic loci. This work can truly be described as christocentric. Moreover, this Christology is deeply incarnational in character. In this incarnation Christ's vicarious humanity is crucial. It is revelatory and redemptive for man and his culture. Thus it is Christ's action as man that reveals the sinful nature of the city and the plight of her inhabitants, while it is also his action that redeems this city and her men. Christ in his vicarious humanity repeats the plight of man in the city and so reverses man's action in Cain. In being Christ the victim he succeeds in bringing about the wonderful exchange for man and his cultural work and so becomes Christ the victor. The distinct contribution of Ellul lies in extending Christ's vicarious humanity to include human work and culture.

Moreover, this humanity of Christ has provided important insights into the relation between man and his cultural work. When we examine what light this work has thrown on the problem of autonomy, what comes out prominently is not that of human or cultural autonomy, but the subjection of man to the heteronomy of the city. Here, Ellul's exposition certainly advances the insight that even the

most materialistic cultural construction of man carries spiritual overtones. He has expounded the plight of man as being enslaved by his own cultural work, so that this work manifests herself as transhuman reality and power. In Ellul's exposition the subjection of man to the heteronomy of the city happened most intensively in Christ and his prophets. However, it is also this vicarious suffering of Christ that is redemptive for man subjected to this cultural heteronomy. In his gathering of the crowd outside the city, Christ has shown his lordship to be most decisive in breaking man's subjection to the city. In his judgment on and substitution for Jerusalem Christ has also shown himself to be the true lord who could break the city's autonomous pretensions against God. Christ's lordship was precisely manifested in redirecting the telos of the city and her inhabitants back to him. He is therefore the true telos of all human cultural endeavours. Thus the humanity of Christ is decisive in ordering a right relation between man and his cultural environment. Man can now strive for an autonomy free from cultural heteronomy under the leadership of this authentic man. This autonomy is therefore both christocentric and human.

3.2.8) The True Nature, Meaning and Goal of the History of the City in the True Horizon of Christ

Through the substitution of Christ for the city a true horizon has been opened up for the history of the city, and the implications of this was worked out by Ellul in *Chapter Five: True Horizon*. We are now to understand the meaning of the city in this horizon. This horizon is situated between the incarnation and the eschaton, which enables the present history of the city to be understood theologically. At the start of this exposition Ellul points out the epistemological relevance of the Word of God for urban science, for it answers the question "*what we are in the city and what the city means for us and for our relation with her*" (p.148), which constitutes the spiritual nucleus of urban science (p.148).

Ontologically, the history of the city is now contained in Christ who is himself history (*p.149*), indeed the explanation and reality of history (*p.149*).¹⁷ Human history is thus taken up and transcended in him. Epistemologically, it is in him that the city can be understood as one of the rare invariables of human history, and therefore as the concrete form of civilization (*p.149*). Moreover, it is in him that this concrete form of civilization is understood to have theological and sacral characters. We can then know why the city has great normative impact on man, why she acts as an element of polarization for all human activities. She becomes the new law, the new necessity (replacing nature) which denies freedom to man. Her nature is revealed in Christ as a parasite, always preying on God's creation and man's flesh both physically and spiritually (*p.151*). In fact what Ellul says of the city is always the case with other forms of human autonomy (*p.151*). It is thus in the light of this revelation, rather than through pure socio-cultural investigation, that the city is understood as **structure of the world** (*p.153*), as man's greatest work, indeed his greatest technical work where all man's powers are born (*p.156*). This also explains the streaming of man to the city which is more mystical than reasonable, and the utopian vision which man has on the future of civilization as a triumph of the city (*p.158*).

However, it is also in Christ that the human wishes behind sacralization of the city in history and in hope are not denied or destroyed, but transformed and fulfilled! Because of God's intervention in Christ, both the original creation of God and the counter creation of Cain find continuity and fulfillment in the New Jerusalem created in Christ. Here Ellul enters into two separate discussions on the two teleological courses of the history of the city from Cain to New Jerusalem and from Eden to New Jerusalem.

¹⁷ For a fuller treatment of this christological understanding of history please see Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*.

3.2.8.1) *From Cain to Jerusalem - A Christological Dissociation of Man from His Cultural Work*

In the discussion *From Cain to Jerusalem* (pp. 163-172) Ellul points out that God's work in Christ is to dissociate man's work from its spiritual power (p. 164). God's truth in Christ is being injected into the reality of the city and now the city is subjected to Christ in this truth. The axiological implication of this subjection is that the truth of Christ has destroyed her apparent and false neutrality, and rendered void her necessity. The truth of Christ has revealed the city to be "*an almost indistinguishable mixture of spiritual power and human work*" (p. 169). Only the death of Christ can change these '*facts of history*' (p. 169), and only the resurrection can dispossess the demonic powers. In short, only the grace of Christ's death and resurrection can neutralize and redeem the nature of the city. In this way God has opened a new possibility for man and made possible man's freedom. God's very act thus allows man room for truly autonomous action (p. 171).

In this vein, Ellul spells out the normative implications of this understanding, that man should act only in the name of Christ and by Christ, to incarnate "*an already victorious truth into the heart of the city*", "*to help bring truth and reality together*" (p. 170). Only in the power of Christ's incarnation can man avoid "*reverting back to the power of the city*" (p. 171). Man must cease to be the '*plaything of forces*' of the city, because Christ has substituted for the human sacrifices in the city (p. 171).

Moreover, Christ will take "*the place and the role of rebellious angel*" (p. 172) because God pronounces over the work of man, i.e., the city, "*the No of death, but in the same breath he pronounces the Yes of resurrection, by creating the unique city*", the heavenly Jerusalem (p. 172). In this creation Christ's final

victory will take her place in the sphere of reality (human reality transformed into divine reality) (p.172).

3.2.8.2) *From Eden to Jerusalem - A Christological Adoption of Man's Cultural Work*

In the following discussion *From Eden to Jerusalem* (pp.173-182) Ellul discusses the continuity and change between God's original and final creations. In terms of change Ellul expounds how God has integrated man's work into His creation and brought about the God-man communion. He understands that God allows the history of man to change the primitive state of things. "*God does not restore the order that he had installed, but creates another*" (p.173). God in Christ chooses to dwell in the city (p.177), so that man can no longer shut God out from 'his little world' (p.174). "*The history of the world...of man...sandwiched...between the beginnings and the re-creation*" (p.174) will become "*part of the great historical line traced by God Himself*" (p.175). God chooses this new form, namely, the city, simply because man has chosen her (p.174). God's election of man's work is part of His election of man. For Ellul, this adoption of man's work even down to transforming God's original creation shows precisely God's love for man in Christ (p.174). Moreover, this is a concrete and realistic love which saves each man of the city 'in his particularity' (p.174). Moreover, only in this 'assumption' (p.175) by God of man's work "*does our work take on meaning, both significance and direction*" (p.176) In God's taking over this civilization of man, there is a transfiguration of both man's technical failures and marvels (p.176).

Man's work is judged and saved by, freed and subjected to Christ, who fills the threefold role as prophet, priest and king (p.177). Jesus as the great recapitulator (p.176) adopted the city (p.176) as man's great work (p.177). In

him, *"God adopts man and his works"* (p.177, Ellul's emphasis). He becomes the Saviour and Lord, not only of creation and man, but also of man's works. He has chosen to dwell in the city to assume and transfigure her. Therefore, the myth of the heavenly Jerusalem *"will be the fulfillment of all that man expected"* (p.176), where *"we may see an answer to the problem of life, of history, of man's work."* (p.173 note 3) This heavenly city is the horizon God renders to man in Christ:

"Direct communion with God is reestablished, so there is no more Temple or church...In this city, the adventure of Christmas is totally realized...the incarnation finds an eternal home. This is the very heart of this extraordinary manifestation of God's love." (p.177)

Thus Ellul achieves a thoroughly christological and incarnational understanding of this progression from Eden to Jerusalem. In this thorough understanding of God's adoption, he has again spelt out the axiological implication, for human works are now connected in the incarnation *"with God's action for man in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit"* (p.178), that is, with God's trinitarian action. Within God's condemnation and redemption in Christ, man's work can no longer be theologically neutral. God's grace and pardon cannot be used as pretext for us to surrender ourselves *"to the angel of the city and its spirit of power"* (p.179). The new Jerusalem has put the earthly history of the city *"under the most terrible of condemnations"* (p.179). The transfiguration of the city *"at the end...is a revelation of God's grace...not to be forced into the present course of things."* (p.179) Thus Ellul has reiterated his negative axiology of the earthly city by stressing the utterly eschatological character of the heavenly city.

Despite such negative axiology, Ellul spells out positive normative implications for Christian action in the city in the present. Firstly, *"because God*

forgives, Christians...are asked to have a share in all of the human life...to build with men their works...to the extent that in Jesus Christ the city is not devilish...that it is destined to be transfigured in the construction of the city...here...the discernment of the Spirit must be active." (p.180) Thus God's pardon is the sole basis for this positive Christian participation in man's effort to build.

Yet there is a limit to this positivity. Christians must still keep in view the vanity and relativity of man's work in ironical contemplation (p.180). Ellul rejects the Thomistic notion of tragic optimism, and opts for the Reformational notion of active pessimism (p.181). In order to avoid transforming this active pessimism into a sterile catastrophism, Christians *"must be able to inject humour into the situation"*, rather than taking our action seriously (p.181). This humour is a form of Christian liberty in our participation in man's work (p.181). It is a limit on our participation in man's work with an attitude of idolatry and unbelief (p.181). *"So we must put our heart into the city, but keep it ours by humour...according to...the irony of faith"* (p.181). Moreover, there is a further limit on our participation, namely, *"when there is no longer possible in Babel any mark of the revelation of God's character in Jesus Christ"* (p.182), the Christian must flee and cut himself off from the city just like Lot (p.182).

3.2.8.3) Interim Conclusion

- A Christonomic Re-evaluation of and Participation in Culture

Thus Ellul has further expounded the implications of Christ's incarnation for the city and man's work. His adoption of man's cultural work, especially the city, has dissociated man from the power of this work, and made possible its transformation in the eschaton, in the final city, the true horizon opened up by Christ's adoption. As Christ is the true telos of all human cultural endeavours

encapsulated by the city, man is to strive for a christocentric autonomy, indeed, a Christonomy, *"Man can act only in the name of Christ and by Christ"* (p.170). This implies a christonomic re-evaluation of (p.178), and then an active participation in the city and all the cultural endeavours of man (p.180). The lordship of Christ is normative for all human cultural endeavours, which must now aim at serving the christocentric autonomy of man.

3.2.9) Human Culture Recapitulated - The Symbolic Meanings of the Eschatological City as God's Full Presence for Communion

After considering Christ's significance for the city and the recapitulation of her history in him, Ellul completes his investigation of the theological meaning of the city with a consideration of the eschatological city and her rich symbolic meanings in the Revelation of John.¹⁸

To begin with, Ellul has pinpointed the evolution of the eschatological Temple in Ezekiel to the eschatological city in John (p.185). For Ellul, the clue lies in

"God's total and exclusive presence--first his presence in the Temple, and then, when the messianic conception had developed, in the entire city...Jerusalem...became altogether a temple, for God is all in all...to be the counterweight of Babylon" (p.186).

Ellul then sets out the hermeneutical principles for understanding the

¹⁸ Ellul first dispels historical-critical theories purporting the evolution of the idea of the heavenly Jerusalem from her earthly Jerusalem (p.184). No matter what, he contends that we can still see the heavenly Jerusalem as revelation of objective truth (p.184).

theological meaning of this city.¹⁹ He first interprets the relation between God and this city. He shows that the heavenly Jerusalem replaces her earthly counterpart as an act of God's grace (p.189). Here God acts as the builder (p.188). In her a new incarnation takes place, so that "*God's material work and his presence are absolutely inseparable.*" (p.189) Thus the name Yahweh-shammah, "*the Lord is there*" (Ezek. 48:35, p.189) echoes the Immanuel. And to ensure absolute communion, the prophets announce that God is coming--from the east (Ezek.43:2; Zech.14:4, p.189), completing Cain's journey. Moreover, this journeying of God is in Christ, founding this city in humility (p.189), which in meaning is the exact opposite of the earthly city (p.190). For Ellul, "*God's presence is the essential point... about the city*" (p.190), for "*He is himself the city...He is everything and everywhere*"(p.190). Although Ellul also asserts that God is "*infinitely other than the city*"(p.190), in his exegesis there is evidently a progression in the unity between God and the world, so that "*communion with God is perfect and limitless.*" (p.190) Thus the God-man communion is evidently the motive for God to act as builder in order to incarnate His full presence in the city.

On this basis Ellul goes on to interpret the relation between this city and the creation. He points out that this city is on a high mountain (p.190) The underlying meaning of this is that "*all of nature will be transformed, but after the resurrection man will live exclusively in the city*" (p.191), just as he was to live exclusively in the garden of Eden before. Here the line of progress from Eden to Yahweh-shammah is again confirmed. This signifies the city as the centre of the new creation, while nature goes back to its relatively autonomous state(p.191). It also signifies that this city is holy, on the holy mountain. Thus this city is "*the*

¹⁹ We shall not go into the details here, but suffice to say that Ellul's principles respect the transcendence of God and His revelation (p.186), yet insist on the relevant character of this symbolism for the original audience and for us (p.187).

unique place in all the new creation where God's glory dwells" (p.191). Again, for Ellul, this means God's presence (p.191) and, indeed, God's reality. That is also why the city is on the mountain, raised to the highest point of all creation (p.192) so that "the whole of creation might be turned toward God"(p.192).

Ellul then goes on to interpret the relation between the city and the nations. Again he thinks that God gives her a central role (p.192). The nations are deprived of their own goals and their own wills(p.192). The city is a 'cup of reeling' going to overwhelm the nations as *"the first act of the progression through the judgement of the nations to the glorious procession climbing toward the new city"*(p.192). In the end of history this is the glorious end of all their efforts. This limited place is the new bond between men, their kings and their nations(p.192) She will always be open for men and the nations to enter (p.193). The entering has signified the election of all nations to become 'the peoples' of God who are all united in Him (p.193). In this way *"this city plays that role which Babylon was trying to play"*(p.194). She is *"a place of gathering together....what man has been seeking since the dawn of civilization...the sum of all his efforts"* (p.194, *bold type ours*). Besides being where God's glory dwells, the city is also transfigured by the nations which also *"bring their glory"* (p.194) Thus *"God completes for all civilizations what he has done for the city"*(p.194). She *"is truly the culmination of history"*(p.194, *bold type ours*).

Lastly, Ellul interprets the relation between the city and her inhabitants. Their plight is obviously *"different from the human crowd...They are characterized...by their communion with God"*(p.195). *"The city is the city of knowledge and of unity in all its forms"*(p.195). The city and her inhabitants is in the figure of the church oriented towards Jesus Christ. Thus the city follows and takes the place of the church (p.195). And the inhabitants are sons of light in the light shed by the king of light who is also the Son of Man (p.196).

After this consideration of the eschatological city in terms of her manifold relations, Ellul now turns to a consideration of the rich symbolism encapsulated by the internal construction of this city. Ellul first deals cursorily with more obvious symbols and then to the less clear ones. We shall not go into the detail of this interpretation, for it will certainly be debatable whether Ellul has exegetically got the symbolism right. It suffices to say that Ellul's interpretation is theological. What he decodes corresponds to all the theological points he has already made. Thus the twelve tribes of Israel signify the bond of election rather than power (p.197). And in the number 'twelve' he finds a profound Trinitarian understanding of the unity between God and the world. (p.198) For 'the measuring rod' (p.201) and 'the twelve precious stones' (pp.199ff) Ellul again conceives of their interpretations in a framework of God-man relationship, and links these profoundly with the Word of God. Finally he turns to the tree and the water and interprets them in the light of the death and life of Christ (pp.207-209). In the end of this rich exegesis of symbolic meanings Ellul can only express the divine order encapsulated in this city as *"beyond our minds and expressible only by figures of speech"* (p.209).

3.2.10) Human Culture's Eschatological Recapitulation - the Trinitarian God's Presence as the True Space or Horizon for Human Culture

Just as Ellul's work on law has expounded God's gracious provision for human culture in the temporal dimension in terms of the creation-covenant-parousia time axis, the present work has also expounded God's gracious provision for human culture in the spatial dimension. He has first expounded the city as man's creation of a space for himself, which is a space created in the epoch of the Fall, a space closed to God and man, a space of non-communion even for her inhabitants (*'the crowd'*, pp.124-135). It further shows how this space of man's

counter-creation has encroached upon God's creation, e.g., in the city's conquest of the country (*pp.* 7-8, 150). Although the city as civilization is man's attempt to conquer space, Ellul's exposition has precisely shown that man has locked himself up in this space. The eschatological city is God's answer to this. Ellul has shown how God has broken open this space, and in the process of electing the city and sending Christ to her, has transformed this space into one for God-man communion in the eschaton. Thus Ellul's works have succeeded in showing how God's economic action in Christ has provided the true time axis and the true space or horizon for man and his culture.

Moreover, in this eschatological transformation of human civilization into the new creation of God, Ellul has advanced the understanding of eschatology. The final city links the eschaton profoundly with the original creation, while at the same time also integrates human culture and history into it in a redemptive way. The eschaton has thus become the true future and the true horizon for human culture.

Certainly, the continuity of the eschaton with man and the original creation can only be achieved in Christ, who is the real presence of the eschaton in man's civilization. Without this real presence there is no future for man and his civilization in the eschaton. It is the profound reality of the incarnation that makes this inclusion of man's city and culture possible. It is by Christ's adoption of human work that man's city and culture is integrated into God's original creation, resulting in a transformed creation which in Christ's parousia will descend from God.

Moreover, it must be recognized that in the eschatological city it is the Trinitarian God Himself Who is present, as Ellul in his interpretation of the number 'twelve' has pinpointed. Therefore, it must be said that the space or horizon that the Trinitarian God is going to provide for man and his culture is His

own presence. Indeed, only this presence can truly merit to be the ultimate space or horizon for us and our work!

3.2.11) Conclusion - Human City and Culture in the Revelation and Redemption of the God-man dialectic

In view of the above analysis, we shall characterize this work as an actual dialectic of God and man in history, indeed in the history of human culture or civilization. We can summarize that God's action in Christ in His dialectic with man is revelatory-redemptive for man and his culture, historically and eschatologically. Through biblical revelation, the actual course of this dialectic in history is set out, on the definite stage of the earthly city, while its eschatological consummation is prophesied in the heavenly city. If we characterize this stage as the world, as Ellul has done²⁰, then we can further characterize this as a God-man dialectic in the world, when this world emerges from a human cultural work to become an independent power, in itself seducing and enslaving man. However, since this world or civilization is drawn into the orbit of the God-man dialectic it is conquered and transformed by God's economic action. Ellul has shown this God-man dialectic to be the most potent dynamic in history, which inexorably carries man and his cultural work towards the end of history and consummates in the most intimate communion between God and man. It also results in the most wonderful transformation of man's cultural work, the most wonderful exchange of God's city for man's city. Thus Ellul's exposition has shown that the God-man dialectic is powerfully revelatory and redemptive not only for man, but also for his work, his culture.

²⁰ See p.59, "Babylon is not only the sign of all other cities, but of the world as well"; p.72, "We must not forget that the city is the symbol of the world, especially today, when it become the synthesis of our entire civilization"; p.209, "opposition that exists between our modern carnal world and transformed world which has been transformed by the fountain of living water".

Surely, Ellul's opening up of the revelatory dimension of the God-man dialectic has an important cultural implication for interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and other human sciences, not only on the problem of the city, but on all domains of culture as well.²¹ We shall explore this point further in our next chapter.

Moreover, Ellul's opening up of the redemptive dimension of the God-man dialectic has also carried soteriology to the new frontier of culture. For traditional soteriology usually dwells on man himself, on his inner feeling of guilt or the personal reality of individual sin. On the contrary, soteriology as championed by third world theologies dwells on the socio-political reality of corporate sin. However, little effort has been expended to understand the cultural-historical dimensions of human sin. However, in Ellul's exposition of the God-man dialectic in culture an analysis of spiritual powers is reached, which achieves a synthetic understanding of the agglomeration of individual sins into corporate ones. Moreover, rather than aggravating the potency of such spiritual powers, Ellul has shown admirably how God's action in Christ's vicarious humanity has conquered them, dissociating man from them, and redeeming them through eschatological transformation.

Furthermore, it also prophesies what man's situation will be like in God's appropriation and transformation of such realities in the heavenly city. Although this transformation has integrated human realities into God's original creation, it does not mean a departure from the teleology and ontology of the original creation. Rather, in the constancy of God's love this eschatologically transformed creation is still God's creation which precisely fulfilled His original purpose of creating a world for God-man communion. Therefore, this redemption brought

²¹ See p.148, *"all that we have learned should form the proper nucleus for a science of the city...the spiritual nucleus...for a human science"*.

about by the God-man dialectic upholds, rather than destroys the original creation. In short, in this profound exposition there is no discontinuity or opposition between the doctrines of creation and redemption. At the same time, this transformed creation constitutes a powerful answer to all those who are *upset* by the thought of a hollow paradise in heaven. It persuasively shows how God's richness (in Greek, 'plethora') can truly take up human plethora and truly enrich it in His new creation. In the end, man's glory will unite with God's glory into a most wonderful world for both God and man.

3.3) What Type of Theology of Culture is Exemplified?

A Descriptive Economic Theology of Culture

After the above extended analysis of this work, how are we going to classify it as a theology of culture? When we compare it with Ellul's work on law, we note several points.

To begin with, both works are deeply economic in character. However, since this work does not have as its target some prominent cultural-historical ideology to contend with, it is not expounded in a schematic manner, nor does it harbour substantial descriptions of cultural-historical cities and their history. Moreover, it expounds the economic action of God at the actual level according to the narrative flow of the Bible, without digging into the foundational theological understandings behind the actual discourse. Therefore, the work does not bear heavily on one or two philosophical-theological concepts, say, grace. Rather, as we have shown in our Section 3.2 above, the actual exposition has implications or ramifications on the various loci of dogmatic theology, rather than vice versa. In fact, we have seen that this work's theological insights on culture arise from these different loci.

Here, it must be recognized that Ellul is basically a biblical and

theological thinker. Although he was fascinated by Marx before his conversion, his basic thinking has been formed and transformed after his conversion.²² This is admirably shown in his understanding of dialectic in a biblical rather than a Hegelian way.²³ Therefore, it can be doubted whether his philosophical-theological understandings of foundational concepts (say, grace) are more ultimate and operate behind his biblico-dogmatic understandings, or vice versa. However, we must also add that this work does correlate well with the previous one, in terms of their foundational understanding of grace. In fact, we can view it as a definitive description of the actual course of God's grace in history, as an exposition of the dialectic of grace at the actual level. Therefore we can characterize the work as a descriptive economic theology of culture.

3.4) What are Ellul's Motives and What is the Resultant Dimensional Profile of its Content?

What are Ellul's motives in this work? It is easy to detect Ellul's cultural-historical concern here, which widens from a concern to think theologically about the problem of technique to that of human work and human culture in general. However, without a concomitant theological concern such rich biblical theological exposition would not be produced. For it is in a deeply theological concern, a concern to understand God's revelation (albeit in connection with human culture) in its own right, that it is possible to avoid taking human culture too seriously. Only in a truly theological concern can Ellul render this descriptive theology of culture truly theological. His paramount achievement lies in truly applying biblico-dogmatic insights to understand human culture, so that this work may be described as a biblical theology of culture, and he himself a biblical theologian

²² Ellul, *Perspectives on our Age*, pp. 1-18.

²³ Jacques Ellul, "On Dialectic", in his *What I Believe*, tr. G. W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), pp.29-46.

of culture.

What is remarkable here is that this theology of culture of Ellul does not only have dogmatic theology as its nucleus, but that this work is Ellul's dogmatic theology *per se*, for the particular concern and style of Ellul means that he would not have a pure dogmatic theology which does not apply to his cultural-historical concern. As an incarnational theologian of culture this theology of culture is the inevitable application of his dogmatic theological thinking. Thus if we ask what motives can be served by this work, then we must recognize that Ellul has his theological as well as cultural-historical concerns fulfilled in one go.

It is in the fulfillment of these simultaneous motives and concerns, that this theology of the city has become predominantly descriptive in profile, rich in theological insights concerning the problems of human culture and human work. Moreover, since Ellul has at the very start situated this phenomenon of the city in human work after the Fall, this descriptive exposition is firstly critical, demythologizing and clearing away ideologies or idolatries concerning the city, thus returning her cultural-historical facts to facticity. We can thus characterize such theological descriptions as critical-descriptions.

On the other hand, the dominance of these correlated cultural and theological motives seems to have crowded out other, say, evangelistic and ethical, concerns. The manner in which the former motive is addressed has inevitably left little room for Ellul to address these other concerns. The normative dimension features rather thinly after critical-descriptions have been expounded for intrabiblical cities. But whether ethical and evangelistic motives can be well addressed depends on what transformed vision can be attained for extrabiblical and postbiblical realities of culture in the true horizon of the eschatological city. We would deal with this later when we come to meditate on the nature of the city as a biblical symbol.

3.5) Significance of its Method - Ellul's Doctrine of the Word of God and his Theological Method's Relation to Culture

From the analytical exposition above, we have studied the theological significance of this descriptive economic theology of culture in relation to the various dogmatic theological loci. Similarly, we expect to study its methodological significance in the light of dogmatic theology.

As we have also indicated above, this work of Ellul is a thoroughly biblical-theological exposition. We may thus characterize its dogmatic method as a biblical-theological method. To analyze how he expounds God's Word we must have recourse to Ellul's understanding of the doctrine of the Word of God which is also manifested here, for there is a profound relationship between the method and content of his theology. What follows may be seen as a further exploration of what we have done in the previous chapter, concerning Ellul's theological methodology, putting it into the perspective of his substantial understanding of the Word of God. We may use Barth's threefold form of the Word of God²⁴ to analyze Ellul's understanding. Whether Ellul has in mind a third form of the Word, namely, a preached Word of church proclamation, is a problem that merits further study. However, we can detect that in this work there is exhibited at least a twofold form of the Word, namely, the revealed Word of Christ and the written Word of the Scripture. This certainly helps us to understand Ellul's biblical-theological method.

To begin with, it helps us to understand why Ellul always does exegesis of biblical passages with reference to Christ. As the revealed Word of God Christ is for Ellul the hermeneutical key to the written Word of God. The close connection between the revealed and the written form of the Word of God means

²⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1, Section 4, pp. 88-124.

that for Ellul only Christ can be the true Word of God. Thus nature must be rejected as a form of the Word of God and be demythologized accordingly. This is the positive christological reason for Ellul to reject the method of natural theology, to reject nature as a legitimate epistemological category to understand revelation. For Ellul, under this christological hermeneutic what is usually paraded as nature is revealed as no more than human cultural ideologies aiming at justifying a certain cultural-historical situation. Certainly, there is no such problem of nature in this work of Ellul, for Ellul has chosen the city which is by nature an artificial human creation.

Moreover, Ellul has an incarnational understanding that unifies these forms of the Word of God. Just as the revealed Word of God is incarnated as man so that we can see him, the written Word of God is this revealed Word of God incarnated in human words. With this understanding Ellul attains a doctrine of revelation that is both positive and real. Just as Ellul has said, God

enters into man's little game, patiently follows the rules man has fixed, and walks in the paths man has opened. Such is the meaning of the Bible as a book written by men. God did not adopt an original means to reveal himself. No, he expressed his revelation in the forms and modes invented by man... (p.176)

Thus the reason for the Word to be incarnate in human words lies with God's decision to enter into a God-man dialectic. God's revelation is positive and real in the sense that there is really the Word of God which the Scripture as its written form cannot be devoid of. It is positive and real in the sense that God's revelation does take seriously our peculiar '*forms and modes*' of expression in the very act of incarnating in them. Moreover, it is positive and real in the sense that this Word really gets through to us despite our peculiar '*forms and modes*' of

expression, i.e., despite our peculiar cultural forms, but indeed through them, although they were originally meant to shut God's revelation out. Thus this positivism and realism of God's revelation arises from the very positivism and realism of God's dialectic with man, and the incarnation and inspiration of Scripture are the precise actions of God to achieve them. On the other hand, this positive and real presence of the Word of God in human culture means that human culture in itself cannot be taken to be God's Word. Thus cultural theology, just as its twin sister natural theology, is to be ruled out. Ellul's doctrine of the Word of God implies that there cannot be cultural theology, but biblical theology of culture.

Thus said, it becomes clear why Ellul can take seriously the results of critical scholarship so as to elucidate the cultural-historical reality of the Scripture, yet not too seriously so as to strip it of any positive Word of God coming out of the human words. Ellul enters into serious dialogue or dialectic with such critical scholarship, in order to pass beyond them to the true theological meanings of biblical revelation (p.72). For him, the theological meanings encapsulated in these words do not arise out of the subjective theological genius of biblical writers, but out of the objective theological reality of God's revelation which uses human words as its vehicles. In this dialectical hermeneutic Ellul is not bothered by the problem of myths. In contrast to Bultmann, whose negative doctrine of God has meant that no positive theological meaning can be obtained from myths²⁵, Ellul's understanding of the positive presence of God's Word in human words means that he can distill theological meaning from human mythical words, even though these as purely human modes of expression in themselves do not carry theological meanings (p.17). That is why he can characterize myth as '*theologized fact*', in the sense that such myth as '*historical, psychological or*

²⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, (London: SCM, 1985), pp.110-122, 155-163.

human fact' (p.18, note 3) is theologized by the Word of God.

This leads us to consider the problem of distinguishing Scriptural words from other purely human words. Here we touch on the nature of the Scripture in its human reality as a cultural product. Again Ellul's understanding is not to deny the cultural character of the Scripture. But because of the positive understanding of the Word of God incarnating in it, he does not understand the Scripture as purely and inherently cultural and human. Otherwise he has to propose a cultural theology very much in the same vein as natural theology, viewing human culture as a form of the Word of God, in parallel with nature as a revelatory category. For Ellul, what really matters is not the commonality of the Scripture with human cultural products, but the differences between them. For it is in the difference of the Scriptural words from human words that revelation is encoded. This guides his comparison of biblical myths with other myths (pp.161-163).

Here, Ellul seems to harbour a particular understanding of the relation between the Jewish people and the Word of God. For Ellul, by virtue of their being the people of God, the Jewish people and their culture have somehow become prophetic bearers of the Word of God, or the Word of God has somehow resided in their consciousness. Thus exegetically, distinguishing the Word of God from human cultural products actually becomes distinguishing Jewish understandings from that of surrounding cultures. Particularly there were the Jewish understandings that did not square with the human cultural facts of the time and so have prophetically borne God's Word (pp.9-10 & notes).

Thus we can see that Ellul's doctrine of the Word of God and his biblical-theological method have profound implications for the theology of culture. In transcending human culture which carries it this Word becomes prophetic and as the Word of God cannot but bear significant theological meanings for human culture. It is therefore expedient for a biblical theology of culture to arise as a

moment in Ellul's biblical-theological movement. At this point we remember Ellul's deep cultural-historical concern in embarking on this work (*p. xviii*). His biblical-theological method has been applied naturally to the arena of culture, for he has a deeply dialectical and incarnational understanding of the revelation of God's Word, making it possible to throw theological light on human culture in the very process of elucidating this Word. For him, the very concepts of the God-man dialectic and the incarnation inevitably draw human culture into God's orbit of action; and a descriptive economic theology of culture naturally comes out of a biblico-dogmatic exposition of the economic action of God. That means a descriptive theology of culture must have dogmatic theology as its true nucleus, for it arises as a particular application of dogmatic theology into the arena of culture. Or to state it in a dynamic way, a descriptive theology of culture is a particular moment of dogmatic theology in its hermeneutical movement.

3.6) Conclusion - Ellul's Definitive Symbolic Theology of Culture in Comparison to Formal Theologies of Culture

To conclude our analysis of Ellul's descriptive economic theology of culture, we try to compare it with another type of theology of culture, namely, formal theology of culture.

Firstly, we find that this work also deals with culture explicitly. Ellul succeeds in doing this because he focussed on the city as the arch symbol of human culture or civilization in its totality. This has enabled Ellul to avoid defining human culture, especially defining it in terms of its essential unity. Therefore we can further characterize this work as a definitive symbolic theology of culture.

Thus the strengths of this theology of culture lie predominantly with the nature of the city as a biblical symbol. The symbolic power of the city arises out

of the way the biblical narratives use her. That is why Ellul prefers to use the term 'sign' rather than 'symbol', for sign *"is an event by which spiritual and even eschatological realities become... actual"* (p.59). Thus this sign, in contrast to symbols established by man, can have the very permanence of the Word of God (p.59).

Moreover, with its multiple symbolizations (see our Section 3.2.1), the city enlightens not only God's dealing with human culture, but also His dealings with multiple dimensions of human existence, and even with transhuman realities like spiritual power. That is why in this work one can delineate not only a theology of culture, but also a theology of human work, of human autonomy, of spiritual power, etc., not to mention that Ellul has intended it to be a theological post-reflection on technique. It is in terms of this multiple symbol that Ellul can elevate the post-reflection from technique to the whole civilization, enabling this post-reflection to attain new theological heights, to become an overall theology of culture. For Ellul it is technique that has given rise to civilization and is coextensive with it. Thus the theological meaning of technique can only be sought in terms of the whole civilization. That is why he analyzes the city, which for him is the arch symbol of technique as well as civilization. Thus the symbolic richness of the city has provided Ellul's theology of culture with an unrivalled richness in dimensions.

Secondly, unlike formal theologies of culture, theological and cultural motives are both prominent in this work. We can readily appreciate the powerful theological and cultural relevance of this work. Because this biblical symbol is situated in God's dialectic with man, an exposition of her history firmly anchors Ellul's theology of culture in the economy of God's concrete dealing with man in the biblical horizon. In this theology we fully recognize that an exposition of God's actual dealing with human culture in history is the right way to embark on a definitive or dogmatic theology of culture. It also points to the paramount

importance of resorting to the totality of biblical revelation to execute this task.

On the contrary, a formal theology of culture which concentrates on expounding the formal category in general does not in fact bring us very far. The formal term is too general, so that any theological formula reached through theologizing on it sounds hollow. There is always a sense of over-generality associated with such formulas as 'Christ transforms culture', for one knows not what exactly Christ has transformed. Now it is different with Christ transforming the city as expounded in this work of Ellul. An exposition in terms of this symbol has dispensed with the need to define the unifying essence of culture. Moreover, the transformation is concrete and historical within the confines of biblical revelation which is economic in character. It is therefore substantial, involving the totality of God's economic action. We are not left with an abstract notion, but a concrete substantial action of God which can be grasped and meditated on. In contrast to formal theologies of culture, this work teaches us to avoid, rather than to spell out idealistic theological view on an abstract idea of culture.

Thus this work shows that a biblical symbol may be a better vehicle than the formal term to understand God's economic action on human culture. The symbol's strength lies in its actually being situated within the totality of God's economy, through which the theological exposition can gain substantial content. And it is only in such economic exposition, that the descriptive, critical and normative dimensions all find their right place in this theology. The power and attraction of this biblical symbol is so much that she attracted another great Christian theologian, namely, Augustine, to expound her.²⁶

3.7) Evaluations and Criticisms

²⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*. There is a lot to be compared in these parallel works of Ellul and Augustine. Yet we could not embark on this task in the scope of this thesis.

3.7.1) Formal and Methodological Consideration: Limitations of a Definitive Theology of Culture in terms of an Arch Symbol

So much for our analysis of the significance of this work of Ellul. Now we must come to extend some important criticisms ^{of} on this work. As we have just highlighted, this work utilized a symbol²⁷ to understand God's dealing with culture and civilization. This is by no means a novel invention by Ellul. He is only following the ancient tradition initiated by Augustine. We would now further discuss problems in this use of a biblical symbol in a theology of culture.

3.7.1.1) First Limitation of the City as a Biblical Symbol *- Problem of Interpreting the Symbol*

Firstly, this symbol can be taken to mean very different things to different theologians. This can be witnessed in the very different expositions received from Augustine and Ellul. This shows that there are considerable difficulties in interpreting this symbol correctly. The problem is again that of cultural theology, for it is very important to reach the truly biblical and christological understanding of the city. Or we say that it is imperative to return 'the city' to its biblical facticity, rather than reading in our cultural ideas of the city into it. It seems that Augustine has read very much the Roman idea of *civitas* into his exposition of the biblical city²⁸, while Ellul's exposition often conjures up an image of the modern city primarily as a materialistic human construction. Only once does he expound her as a form of human community (*pp.124-135*), namely, the urban crowd. But

²⁷ We do not deny the possibility of a theology of the city in its own right, not as a symbol for culture. However, we must point out that the cities in the Bible are nearly always used as symbols, to symbolize realities greater than the city in itself. This is also the opinion of Ellul. See *p.173, note 3*.

²⁸ Frederick Van Fleteren, "*De Civitate Dei: Miscellaneous Observations*", in Dorothy F. Donnelly (ed.), *The City of God: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), pp.415-429.

this crowd is also a very modern kind of urban community. Therefore, the problem of a cultural reading of the biblical symbol may appear in the theologians who have already tried very consciously to follow the biblical revelation faithfully and to avoid the danger of cultural theology. Thus, further examination needs to be done to determine whether an interpretation is faithful to the biblical symbol as she was originally meant to be.

3.7.1.2) Second Limitation of the City as a Biblical Symbol

- Problem of the Particularity of Individual Cultural Elements

Secondly, even if biblical revelation intends the city to symbolize human culture in general, it remains to be seen whether she can adequately symbolize specific cultural elements like technique, which first prompts Ellul to embark on this general theological reflection. The problem here lies with applying this general symbol to particular cultural elements. The city as a particular cultural element in herself can only symbolize some but not all elements or aspects of the total reality of a culture. Thus even as a rich symbol there may be aspects of God's dealing with human culture which are outside God's dealing with this symbol. This will limit the theological adequacy and so cultural relevance of a theological exposition of her.

One would certainly ask whether it would not be more fruitful to develop a biblical theology of technique directly from a consideration of human skills directly featured in the Scripture (Genesis 4:17-22; Exodus 25:1-31:11), or from the stories of the Mosaic and Davidic censuses (Numbers 1:1-2:34; 26:1-65; 1 Chronicles 21:1-17). Certainly one can defend Ellul by pointing to the overwhelmingly artificial and technical nature of the city. One can further point out that the multiple realities of the city bring out more of the fundamental characteristics of technique, like spiritual power, human work, human environment, etc. These aspects of technique are not furnished even in the biblical

passages which directly touch on it.

Yet, when we pay closer attention to the nature and place of the city in the biblical narrative, we find that she is something which only arose after the Fall. This fact alone would hamper her ability to symbolize or include human cultural elements that have a possible creational basis, say, law, the marriage institutions, and even technique itself! Indeed, although Ellul has vehemently denied that technique has a possible creational origin²⁹, nevertheless the problem must still be posed whether the city is an appropriate symbol for it. One must also ask whether the use of this symbol unnecessarily accentuated the negative side, the fallen character of technique, whose creational basis cannot be cursorily ruled out.

As a further consideration, it can be argued that technique belongs basically to the material side of human culture, thus it is more congenial to be symbolized by the material city, for it seems that among human cultural elements the nature of the city is more conducive to symbolizing human material culture or civilization. But how about human cultural elements that belong to the ideological side, say, literature, philosophy, etc? This underscores the problem we have just mentioned, namely, given the variety of cultural elements, is it possible for the symbol of the city to generalize God's dealing with each specific cultural element?

The problem has to do with the particularity of the city herself as a cultural element. If we contend that God's dealing with, say, philosophy, follows

²⁹ Ellul has made this point in two articles concerning the possible creational origin to technique, namely, "Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis", and "The Relation of Man to Creation according to the Bible", both in Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote (eds.), *Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis and Exegesis*, (Lanham, London and New York: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 123-137, 125-155 respectively.

a similar pattern as that of His dealing with the city, namely, that there are both a dialectical No and Yes towards human philosophy as part of God's dialectic with man, we may have unwittingly admitted that it is the more fundamental God-man dialectic that is theologically paradigmatic and generalizable for specific cultural elements. The theology of the city would then remain a general symbolic theology of 'culture' at large, and is in no way extendable to specific cultural elements. It will then become restricted to generality, like many formal theologies of culture. Just as God's dialectic with human law has its specificity, His dialectic with the biblical city may also be so peculiar that this dialectic may not be paradigmatic for all other cultural elements.

In this peculiarity, the theology of the city may at most be taken as a theology of a particular cultural element. But this would raise the problem of whether there can be any generalizable theology of culture, especially in terms of a cultural element acting as the symbol for the whole culture. Ellul's position in this work is to view the city as some kind of cultural totality, as the word **civilization** would suggest (*pp.149-150*). As a totality she concretely includes all specific cultural elements, yet she transcends each of them in her totality, allowing for a general theology of culture in its own right, as well as freedom for theologies of specific cultural elements to remain in its orbit, and yet to retain their own particularity. Here, we go back to the initial problem that this symbol can be taken to mean very different things, and further work must be done in order to clarify her original symbolic meaning in the Bible, before we can better consider what function this symbol can play in a general theology of culture, especially in relation to various theologies of particular cultural elements.

3.7.1.3) Third Limitation of the City as a Biblical Symbol

- Problem of Extrabiblical Applications

The problem of symbolic representation takes on further gravity when we

plicability of this biblical symbol to extrabiblical realities. This has problem of the particularity of different ethnic cultures. When we Ellul's descriptive theology of the city can describe extrabiblical immediately faced with the question whether this is only a theology produced by a particular cultural or ethnic group, which may not be applicable even to the same element in other ethnic cultures. In concrete terms, we are to ask whether a descriptive theology of the city in the eyes of Jewish culture is paradigmatic for the city in other ethnic cultures. We can further ask whether there are multiple descriptive theologies of the same cultural element for different ethnic cultures. There is a nagging doubt whether biblical insights into one particular culture's element can be directly applied to its extrabiblical counterparts.

Certainly, Ellul's view is that the pronouncement of the Word of God on a particular culture is applicable to all ethnic cultures. In his understanding of the Word of God as incarnating in the word of man, he has posited a particular relationship between the Word of God and Jewish culture, so that there is no longer an inherently 'Jewish' theology of the city, but the very pronouncement of the Word of God on all cities through Jewish prophecies. Ellul surely thinks that the biblical horizon is all inclusive, so that there are in fact no extrabiblical realities, and that God's dealing with the city in the biblical horizon can be extended to her 'extrabiblical' counterparts.

Yet the answer may not be so simple, especially if one has to be as realistic as Ellul, not to dismiss concrete cultural-historical facts as they stand. Therefore, theological criticisms of the city in other cultures must be based on actual cultural-historical facts of their cities. We find this procedure challenging, for cities in other cultures do not necessarily show the same theological features as those described by the biblical canon. Although Ellul has mentioned in passing Chinese and Indian cities(*p.149*), he seems not to have dug into the particular

theological meanings of their construction. He simply makes a casual remark that these '*were nonetheless peaceful*' (p.149).

While we are ignorant of the theological meaning of the Indian cities, as Chinese we at least know the basic theological meaning of the Chinese imperial city.³⁰ In the absence of definite revelation from God the Chinese have developed a more or less pantheistic or at least mystical understanding of heaven. In this vaguely pantheistic or mystical understanding the political order was also a divine order, a hierarchy in the true sense of the word. The emperor was thought to receive a heavenly mandate to govern on behalf of heaven, to attain peace and harmony ~~of~~ ⁱⁿ the world. The Chinese imperial cities, like Peking and Xian, were mainly inhabited by the emperor, the aristocrats, the Mandarins (who were the landlords) and the merchants, while the bulk of the people as peasants lived in the countryside. The imperial city was thus constructed in a way to reflect this divine order. Thus arose her exact position with a north-south axis, with rectangular or square city walls to reflect order and harmony. The imperial palace occupied the centre of the city, facing south to signify the extension of political authority to the Chinese mainland, which was effectively the entire world at that time. The mandarins and aristocrats live beside the emperor in rectangular blocks, conveying a strong sense of symmetry and order. It does not seem that such a city was built out of human rebellion towards God, in a context where a monotheistic God was not even known. Nor was she built in order to shut the gods out, for she was built precisely to actualize the divine order on earth, to bring harmony and union between heaven and man. Although she was peaceful, she did signify power and authority, with the huge imperial walls, the immense imperial palace, and all the rites and rituals associated with the official occasions and ceremonies.

³⁰ See, for example, Arthur F. Wright, "The Cosmology of the Chinese City", in G. William Skinner (ed.), *The City in Late Imperial China*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp.33-73. The following description is not taken from this article, for as ethnic Chinese we have our own understanding.

However, this was not human power or autonomous spiritual power asserting itself against God, but divine power actualized in the emperor and the imperial establishment.

In face of such cultural, and so theological peculiarities of the Chinese city, we find that Ellul has glossed over the cultural-historical facts of extrabiblical realities. He has overlooked the particular cultural character of the Chinese city as a symbol of imperial and cosmic order, rather than as a countercreation to God's curse. He has not recognized that the existence of the One Creator God and His curse on fallen men was not directly comprehended in Chinese culture, so much so that the Chinese city was not built with the same theological intention. This is not to deny that biblical revelation has significance for our theological critique of Chinese cities and culture. Yet this particular case does show the limit of applying biblical pronouncements on a biblical symbol directly to its extrabiblical counterparts, for those biblical pronouncements are elaborated within a certain theo-cultural context or boundary, a context which harbours a definite theological preunderstanding as part of its cultural presupposition.

No doubt, we must at this point reiterate that Ellul chooses this symbol precisely because it appears to him to correspond better than other biblical symbols to the extrabiblical reality he wants to deal with, namely, the technical milieu developed by western Christian civilization. In Ellul's eyes she is more adequate than other biblical symbols (say, the Kingdom of God) to express, prophesy and extend God's dealing with the extrabiblical technical milieu. As we have said above, whether the biblical city is really adequate for this particular extrabiblical cultural reality needs further examination. To say the least, her applicability to the modern technical milieu does not guarantee her applicability to the rich variety of extrabiblical realities, especially those in another ethnic culture. Moreover, such applicability needs to be demonstrated rather than

asserted, through a detailed comparison of this symbol with the realities of its extrabiblical counterparts. A simple invocation of the presence of the Word of God in the sign or symbol would not do.

Thus it seems that Ellul's theology of the city, either as a general theology of culture or as a theology of a particular cultural element, may not really apply to another ethnic culture or its counterpart elements. It remains descriptive within the biblical confines. That is to say, it does not realistically describe the theocultural situations of extrabiblical cultures or their specific elements. To force this descriptive theology of the biblical cities on extrabiblical ones may constitute an act of cultural-historical negligence as well as theological violence. This constitutes a limit to the critical-descriptive power of this biblical theology of culture of Ellul.

But then how can we theologically describe and criticize the situations of extrabiblical cultures or their specific elements? To overcome cultural boundaries and to let biblical revelation speak on extrabiblical realities, more fundamental theological insights into the plight of man universal to all cultures are needed. Referring to the example of the Chinese imperial cities, we must have recourse to dogmatic theology and foundational theological concepts in order to produce a descriptive theology of such extrabiblical cultures. Such theological critical-description cannot be possible without an actual knowledge of the cultures concerned. That means that such critical-description must be a second order theological interpretation of human cultural facts.

3.7.1.4) Fourth Limitation of the City as a Biblical Symbol

- The Problem of Post-biblical Cities

But if these critical-descriptive theologies of extrabiblical cultures can be culled directly from dogmatic and foundational theological concepts, what is the

point of elaborating a general biblical theology of culture in terms of this symbolic city? If the same dogmatic understanding can spell out all the different theologies of particular cultural elements, what will be their interrelations? Do these questions render the biblical theology of culture in terms of the city superfluous?

The clue to answering these questions lies with God's economic momentum that has given rise to the incarnation of the Word of God. Within this economic momentum, once extrabiblical cultures are described and criticized in the light of the Word of God, they can no longer continue as 'extra'-biblical realities. They are inevitably drawn into the biblical horizon, i.e., into the orbit of God's economic action in Christ. In short, these extrabiblical cultures have become **biblico-nomic** (and **christonomic**) realities. Thus they are now inextricably linked with biblical revelation and must now be oriented towards a biblical theology of culture.

Thus in the light of the biblical theology of the city the modern Chinese cities can no longer pretend to be actualizing heavenly order or power. Before the claims of the God of heaven and earth and His incarnate Son these Chinese cities can only join the fate of biblical cities and be seen as attempts of human rebellion, attempts to shut the true God and Christ out of themselves. Thus under the theological description and criticism issuing from the Bible, all extrabiblical cultures can no longer continue as extra-biblical ones. In cultural-historical terms they are dubbed as **post-biblical**, although in theological terms nothing can be 'post'-biblical but **biblico-** and **christo-nomic**. To the extent that the city is an eschatological as well as historical symbol, it deals with human culture both in the past and in the future. That is to say, Ellul has understood the city firmly within the christocentric creation-covenant-parousia time axis, which disallows the cultural-historical qualifier. Particularly this axis enables the Bible to make prophetic pronouncements on 'post'-biblical realities that have not been directly

mentioned or even imagined by the biblical authors. All ethnic cultures are now linked up with the Jewish culture of the Bible, and all specific cultural elements are drawn into the cultural totality represented by the biblical city. This is exactly what happens to the Gentile cities and cultures within the biblical confines. And for Ellul, the eschatological city, which will be the recapitulation of all human cities and culture, constitutes the true horizon for all cities and cultures, intra- or extra-biblical ones alike.

Within this true horizon lies the true significance of the critical and the normative dimensions of Ellul's descriptive theology of the city and culture, which he has not fully expounded. It is in this true horizon that Ellul can engage in dialectic with all extrabiblical cities and cultures. It is also in this true horizon that we know where the cities are evolving in their 'post'-biblical phase. Theological criticisms can then be extended to these cities' cultural-historical developments. As we have mentioned in our last chapter, these critical judgments themselves are precisely part of the transformation that revelation has brought to human cities and cultures. Again, human cities and cultures both inside and outside the biblical confines are criticized and transformed by what the heavenly city is to come in Christ. Therefore, after such criticisms normative theo-cultural actions can be proposed to transform these cities (e.g. in their architecture) in the present. In fact, only under the impetus of such theo-cultural criticisms and normative actions, can such extra-biblical cities become truly biblico- and christo-nomic.

Ellul's problem is that he does not seem to be aware of the original particularity of extrabiblical cities, and tends to treat biblical judgments on intrabiblical cities as immediately applicable to extrabiblical ones. He has therefore failed to recognize the need for independent critical-descriptive theologies of extrabiblical cities and cultures, and has yet to interpret and evaluate the theological meanings of the cultural-historical developments of such cities in

their 'post'-biblical phase, in the light of the true horizon. The interim period between the first coming of Christ and his parousia has seen the greatest development of human cities throughout history. Yet Ellul's exposition has not been very forthcoming in diagnosing the significance of this development.³¹

Although Ellul's exposition of the true horizon has opened up possibilities for interdisciplinary studies of the city with theology as their true nucleus, actual critical theo-cultural studies of human cities have yet to be advanced. Without a theological interpretation and criticism of the cultural history of the cities, especially after the coming of Christ, it is impossible for Ellul to arrive at profound normative theological ethics for the cities. This helps explain the relative thinness of the normative dimension in this work of Ellul. Thus with this lack of critical and normative dimensions, the work remains largely a descriptive theology of culture within its biblical confines. It fails to address Ellul's deep ethical concern as reflected in his *The Presence of the Kingdom*³². It remains for Ellul's other works to fill this deficiency in critical and normative theological thinking on culture, on 'post'-biblical cultures, especially the culture of our time.

3.7.2) Material Considerations: Problems of a Theology of Culture Arising from Problems of its Various Dogmatic Loci

We have discussed the problems of this work of Ellul in terms of its form as a symbolic theology of culture. These problems can help explain the relative thinness in the normative dimension of this work. But in our opinion this thinness

³¹ As David W. Gill has remarked, "The other shortcoming of *The Meaning of the City* is its lack of a forceful or systematic presentation of suggestions on how this transhistorical combat between Grace and Judgment gets worked out, especially in a positive sense, in our empirical history." See his *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul*, (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1979), p.162.

³² Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, tr. Olive Wyon, (New York: Seabury, 1967, first edition, 1951, original French edition, 1948).

of the normative dimension has more to do with the theological understanding of this work, and to investigate this problem would mandate a material evaluation of it.

The first and foremost theological problem of this work lies with the doctrine of election. It is the problem of an actualistic and infralapsarian view of election and its effect on understanding creation, man and human culture. Due to the actual manner of its discourse, it seems that Ellul is propounding an infralapsarian view of God's election of man and his culture. God chooses man and his city only after he has fallen and embarked on the fallen acts of city-building and city-dwelling. In this infralapsarian understanding what is most problematic is, following the line we have explored in the previous chapter, the relation between creation and culture. Do not human cultural acts arise from his nature as a creature, albeit as an alienated creature, so much so that Paul in Acts Chapter 17 can pronounce a positive theological purpose for man's cultural-historical pursuits? It seems that in Ellul's exposition of the biblical pronouncements on the city, he has ruled out any speculations in this direction. His stance in this work is of a piece with his more direct theological investigation on the origin of human technique.³³ Thus Ellul's actualistic exposition of God's election of man and his cultural work is not conducive to an exploration of the possible relation between creation and human culture.

Another theological problem lies with its eschatology. It seems that Ellul has laid too much stress on the eschatological nature of God's salvation of human cities and culture, so much so that the fruit of Christ's incarnational work can only lie in the future, and the presence of God and the transformation of human culture can only be actualized in the eschaton. In other words, Ellul has focussed one-sidedly on the futuristic aspect, without paying sufficient attention to the

³³ Ellul, "Technique and the Opening Chapter of Genesis".

present or realized aspect of the eschaton. This also means, theologically, the eschatologization of soteriology. Thus although his soteriology has suggested a christological transformation of human city and culture, his theological description of the cultural history of the city after Christ (*pp.148-158*) has not borne this out. Without this christological transformation understood to have actually happened in history, the cultural history opened up by the dialectic of God with human cities and cultures is also not understood to have produced any positive development.

Yet in fact the cultural history of the city after the first coming of Christ is situated in the creation-covenant-parousia axis, within the true horizon of the eschatological city. Although Ellul formally understands that ontologically the history of the city is now contained in Christ, in actual fact this understanding only produces a negative theological epistemology for the 'post'-biblical city (see our Section 3.2.8 above). It is unimaginable that after the coming of Christ all that is left with human cities (and cultures) are only negative developments, are only the full-blooming of its negative theological nature and its spiritual power, and the full actualization of the negative theological intentions of its builders.

Such understanding in fact means that Christ only fulfills his prophetic office in relation to the city in 'post'-biblical history. We must inquire whether Ellul has any idea of how Christ will fulfill his priestly and kingly offices in relation to the 'post'-biblical city. This brings us to a consideration of a third theological problem, namely, the lack of an ecclesiology, indeed an urban ecclesiology, in this work.

Biblically speaking, this is manifested in the omission of the later part of the New Testament in Ellul's exposition, and is regrettable especially since Ellul has produced such a remarkable analysis of the socio-cultural dimension of the city in terms of the plight of the crowd. If the temporary gatherings of the

multitude around Christ are so important for a theological study of the city, how much more important will the new community founded as Christ's body inside the city be! If the temporary communion with Christ away from the city is so remarkable for transforming the inner nature of the crowd, how much more remarkable will be the permanent centres of communion within the very centre of the city, namely, the church. This is certainly the case with Corinth, when Luke says that it is the Lord who said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent...for I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:9-10) Thus in face of this notoriously important yet corrupt city of the New Testament, God's answer is to encourage the apostles to carry the gospel unafraidly to her. In establishing the church in the city God definitely shows His election of the city.³⁴ Thus with the advent of the church the manner of God's election of the city is different from that in the Old Testament. There God chooses a city in spite of her inhabitants (in the case of Jerusalem and the refuge cities...). In the Old Testament, in the case of Sodom for instance, what God can do is to separate the righteous inhabitant, namely, Lot, from her (Gen. Ch.19). Only in the prophetic case of Nineveh does God spare the city because of the repentance of her inhabitants. Now it is in the New Testament era of the church that this prophecy takes on reality, that God chooses the city by choosing the man in her, and the church becomes the sure sign of God's election of grace for the city. It is regrettable that Ellul has not paid attention to these New Testament cities and to arrive at a fuller understanding of the church's role in them.³⁵ This certainly

³⁴ For reflections on the Church and its contemporary urban reality, see David F. Ford, "Faith in the Cities: Corinth and the Modern City", in Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (eds.), *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), pp.225-256. For understanding the urban Christian Churches founded by Paul, see, Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

³⁵ Curiously, Ellul's lack of ecclesiology in his theology of the city has affected a scholar who has also tried to spell out a brief theology of the city in an Ellullian manner. See David W. Gill, "Biblical Theology of City", in Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, revised edition, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 713-

contributes to the thinness of the normative dimension in this work, and the missionary and ethical concerns are not well served by such thinness.³⁶ All in all, there is the unfinished task of spelling out urban mission and urban ethics in the light of God's revelatory-redemptive action on the city. This points to an incompleteness in his understanding of God's redemptive work on the city, particularly in this interim period between the first and second coming of Christ.

715. Although Gill has mentioned the spread of the Apostolic Church from city to city (p.714), and the task of proclamation of the Gospel to the cities (p.715), there is still little of ecclesiology there. Gill would have hoped that his exposition would be more balanced than Ellul's, yet as a brief essay it certainly cannot compare favourably with the amazing details and insights of the work of Ellul, nor does it show any significant advance in theme or architecture, certainly not in terms of a fuller ecclesiology. See David W. Gill, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul*, p.177, note 66.

³⁶ So much so that this work of Ellul, although by far the most profound theological work on the city in recent decades, has not made its impact felt in the contemporary discussion of urban missiology. See, for example, Craig Ellison (ed.), *The Urban Mission*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974), and Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1991).

Chapter 4) Theology in Dialectic with Cultural-historical

Analysis I - Ellul's Critical Theological Understanding¹ in his Cultural-historical Analysis of Technique

4.1) Introduction

In the previous chapter we have examined Ellul's definitive theological statement on the city. We have noticed the problems of how this theology of the biblical cities can symbolize human culture or civilization in its totality, how it can include extra-biblical cultures into its horizon, and how it can enter into extensive dialogue with specific cultural elements or domains in 'post'-biblical history. To examine these problems further we have to examine Ellul's actual theo-cultural critique of specific cultural elements or domains in specific culture, and his theological interpretations of specific culture in history and in the present. In the first part of this effort we shall try to look at Ellul's cultural-historical analysis of technique.

Since Ellul's works on technique were spelt out in the form of cultural-historical analyses, we do not approach the works as such, but shall try to examine the critical theological understanding behind such works, and see how it affect the cultural-historical analyses. In fact, we shall see that his cultural-historical analysis of technique arises from his critical theological pre-understanding of the same. Furthermore, in the previous chapters we have seen how Ellul's critical theologies of law and the city have been included within his definitive theologies of God's action on law and the city. In this chapter we shall see whether his critical theological understanding of technique has been similarly

¹ When Ellul's critical analyses of cultural elements or domains take cultural-historical form, it is impossible to speak of critical theologies of them but only critical theological understanding behind these cultural-historical analyses.

included in a definitive theology of culture, and whether this inclusion has affected his cultural-historical analysis of technique or not. We shall also try to evaluate this analysis in theological perspective.

4.2) Ellul's Work on Law as a Critical Theology of a Cultural Domain²

4.2.1) Formal Considerations

Before looking at Ellul's critical theological understanding of technique we shall take a second look at Ellul's work on law, in order to expand its relevance as a critical theology of a cultural element. In this foundational theology of culture, one can appreciate Ellul's critical theological understanding of a cultural element or domain. It is paradigmatic for Ellul's other critical theologies of specific cultural elements. Here it is evident that Ellul's attention is mainly on a 'post'-biblical phase of law, namely, natural law. Thus Ellul goes beyond the biblical corpus to provide a cultural-historical analysis of this post-biblical phase of law (*Preliminary Chapter, pp.17-36, Chapter II, pp.60-74*). And his critical intent is evident from the very beginning, although his deeper concern here is constructive or normative rather than critical, as we have already pointed out.

As indicated in our Chapter 2 (Sections 2.5.1.5-2.5.1.7), the basic critical-theological procedures have been set out, namely, that human cultural facts are dialectically confronted by divine economic facts. That is to say, the God-man dialectic is the framework in which critical-theological procedures are carried out. In this critical confrontation, the foundational problems of law are exposed, which then draw out God's graceful analogical actions on law. Upon a

² Hereafter in the present Section 4.2 all the page numbers and quotations in *italic* form in the main text and in the footnotes refer to this work of Ellul, namely, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, tr. Marguerite Wieser (New York: Seabury, 1969, first published 1960, original French edition 1946).

deeper reflection on these actual economic actions, it is found that God has indeed provided a theological foundation of grace for law. Upon this theological foundation a normative theology of law is spelt out, which would guide the Christians' normative action on law in the post-war civilization.

Just as Ellul's descriptive theology of the city is not devoid of its critical dimension, neither can this critical theological analysis of law be devoid of its descriptive dimension.

In the very process of theologically criticizing the cultural-historical description, a really theologically descriptive dimension, which describes God's gracious action on law, comes out (*Chapter I, pp.37-59*). Upon a closer examination this is an economic description arising from God's dialectical action of judgment and appropriation of human law within the biblical horizon.

Since for Ellul God is transcendent, His truth is not to be identified with any cultural element. There is simply no natural basis in creation for human cultural elements to ground antecedently in the truths of God. This is the case even for human law and its essence of justice, which many would think of having its basis in an eternal divine law and divine righteousness. Not even the very domain of law is said to be instituted by God. On the contrary, Ellul's understanding is that even if there is a divine law and righteousness, these are God's a posteriori adoption of human cultural elements in order to reveal Himself. Thus for Ellul, the critical dimension would come out first to prepare for God's action which constitutes the descriptive dimension, followed by the normative dimension.

4.2.2) Extension of the Critical-descriptive Movement

In the theological criticism of natural law, it is evident that this critical-descriptive movement does not stop within the biblical confines. It takes on

further facts of the same element outside the biblical horizon. God's economic action on the biblical horizon must extend beyond the biblical confines and include extrabiblical cultures into itself, turning them into biblico-nomic realities. That is why Ellul has applied biblical understanding of divine law to criticize extrabiblical natural law. This post-biblical 'natural' law is then appropriated into the creation-covenant-parousia time axis, so that Ellul can draw normative implications from this appropriation. This critical-descriptive movement of appropriation will terminate only at the eschaton.

Therefore, a complete theology of a specific cultural element will include all extrabiblical facts of the element into itself. It is in this understanding that we criticized Ellul's failure to engage with other post-biblical developments of law (say, human rights) in this critical-descriptive movement (see our Section 2.6.3). Nevertheless, this work is paradigmatic for Ellul's critical theologies of other cultural elements. Its extrabiblical dimension still compares favourably with that of his work on the city.

4.3) Ellul's Critical Theological Understanding behind His Analysis of Technique as the Dominant Cultural Element³

4.3.1) Introduction

After Ellul has analyzed the cultural elements of law and money⁴, he

³ Hereafter in this chapter all the page numbers and quotations in *italic* form in the main text and in the footnotes refer to Ellul's seminal work on technique, namely, *The Technological Society*, tr. John Wilkinson, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964). The original French edition, in the title *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, was published by Armand Colin (Paris) in 1954.

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power*, tr. LaVonne Neff, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979). Originally published in 1954 as *L'Homme et l'argent (Nova et vetera)* by Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé. The translation is taken from the Second Edition, which has an additional afterword to the 1954 edition.

turned his eye to the cultural element which has ever since occupied his main attention, namely, technique. His works in the field ^{have} ~~has~~ made him famous, especially in North America. His basic thesis that technique (an essentially Continental term with wider connotations than the English term 'technology')⁵ has in the late 20th Century become nearly autonomous, become a power and a system on its own, has continued to arouse discussion and criticism. His first work on technique has become a classic⁶. And this book, together with its two main sequels⁷, constitute one of the most sustained and widely-discussed critique of technique and technology in the West. For Ellul himself this analysis of technique has become the centerpiece of his cultural analysis of modern western culture.⁸

As we have set out in Section 4.1 above, we shall criticize Ellul's cultural analysis of technique, not from the perspective of some cultural discipline, say, sociology, but from the theological perspective, through unravelling its theological pre-understanding. In doing so we have certainly viewed his cultural analysis of

⁵ We shall later comment on the significant linguistic, and thereby, cultural differences of these two terms.

⁶ The French edition was reissued in France, 1990 by Ed. Economica.

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980, original French edition, 1977, in the title *Le Système technicien*); and *The Technological Bluff*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990, original French edition, 1988, in the title *Le bluff technologique*).

⁸ In the early period, *The Technological Society* leads to other works such as *The Political Illusion*, tr. Konrad Kellen (New York: Knopf, 1967, original French edition 1965), *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, tr. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1965), and *The New Demons*, tr. C. Edward Hopkin, (New York: Seabury, 1975, original French edition, 1973). In Ellul's later period, *The Technological System*, leads to *L'Empire du non-sens: L'Art et la société technicienne*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), *The Humiliation of the Word*, tr. Joyce M. Hanks (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985, original French edition 1981), etc.

technique as an extension of foundational theological understanding of the same. In our understanding there cannot be a pure socio-cultural analysis that is free from theological pre-understanding. This is especially true for Ellul. Here we shall see that the problems of his cultural analysis of technique are not due to a lack of cultural-historical facts, nor due to getting them wrong, but consistently a problem of neglect, of over-estimation, or of under-estimation of cultural-historical facts due to his theological pre-understanding.

Here we must also point out that Ellul's definitive theological post-reflection on technique, namely, his theology of the city⁹, is strangely not very pertinent to our effort. The reason is that this reflection in fact tackles the cultural framework as a whole, rather than technique alone.¹⁰ That is why this work becomes his definitive theological statement on human culture and civilization. Surely, this work carries the same set of foundational theological concepts. Yet because Ellul has based on them to spell out this theology of the city at the actual level, this post-reflection has only indirect and limited relevance for our critical analysis of his theological understanding of technique.

4.3.1.1) *Two Basic Observations*

When we try to tackle Ellul's cultural analysis of technique from a theological perspective, we shall proceed with two basic observations. Firstly, we observe that Ellul analyzes technique by situating it in the framework of culture or civilization. This framework is obvious from the first chapter of *The*

⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, ed. William H. Vanderburg, tr. Joachim Neugroschel, (New York: Seabury, 1981), p.59.

¹⁰ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, tr. Dennis Pardee, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), p.xviii, and our discussion in the previous chapter.

Technological Society and from some other articles¹¹. Thus it can be said that Ellul in the end analyzes not only technique but the whole modern civilization. However, although some studies on Ellul have touched on this framework, most studies on Ellul have not given this framework its due place of importance in comprehending Ellul's analysis.¹²

Secondly, we observe that Ellul envisages technique as a kind of spiritual power, and his analysis of technique can be viewed as an analysis of power in modern civilization. Bearing in mind this basic framework of culture and this basic essence of technique as spiritual power, we shall proceed with our critical analysis of Ellul's works on technique. We shall see that his theological pre-understanding in fact undergirds his cultural analysis of technique.

4.3.1.2) Progression of Ellul's Analysis

Bearing in mind the basic framework of culture or civilization, it becomes easily comprehensible why Ellul's works on technique progress as they do. Thus his first work *The Technological Society* is a seminal one which tries to define the domain of technique and to situate the technical phenomenon in the framework of civilization. In this vein he pays particular attention to the relationship between technique and the economic domain (*Chapter III, pp.148-227*), between technique

¹¹ Jacques Ellul, "Technique et Civilisation", *Free University Quarterly* (Amsterdam), vol. 7, no. 2 (Aug. 1960), pp. 72-84; and "La Technique peut-elle être la mère d'une civilisation?", *Terre Entière*, no. 22 (March-April 1967), pp. 6-27. Besides, see Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, pp. 132-148.

¹² The following studies have given some consideration on the significance of this framework: David W. Gill, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1979), especially its Chapter Three, pp. 132-179; Randall H. Ihara, *Redeeming the Time: Theology, Technology, and Politics in the Thought of Jacques Ellul*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1975), pp. 131-139; and Gary P. Wren, *Technique, Society and Politics: A Critical Study of the Works of Jacques Ellul* (Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1977), pp. 189-227.

and the political domain (*Chapter IV, pp.228-318*), and between technique and man (*Chapter V, pp.319-427*). However, it becomes problematic as how he can visualize all the different techniques as one integrated domain and power. This has prompted him to embark on the second work, namely, *The Technological System*¹³. This is a reworking and an expansion of the first part of *The Technological Society* from a system perspective, in which he tries to clarify definitional problems and to straighten out and deepen its characterology.

The third work, namely, *The Technological Bluff*,¹⁴ takes Ellul's cultural analysis of technique to a new dimension, namely, the functioning of technique as a discourse. From the perspective of culture this is necessary, for if technique as a cultural domain in the material realm is able to induce man into collaboration, it must produce its own world of discourse.

4.3.2) Critical Analysis - Ellul's Understanding of Technique as an Autonomous Spiritual Power

As our intention is to concentrate on Ellul's theological pre- understanding on the problem of technique, which has very much to do with how he visualizes technique as a spiritual power, we shall be concerned mainly with the initial part of his seminal work, which concentrates on the definition and characterology of technique (*pp.3-147*).

Early in Ellul's theological endeavour, he has propounded an understanding of spiritual power, which states that "power is something that acts by itself, is capable of moving other things, is autonomous (or claims to be), is

¹³ See footnote 7.

¹⁴ See footnote 7.

a law unto itself, and presents itself as an active agent...Power has a spiritual value...power is more or less personal."¹⁵ These, he claims, represent the sense it is used in the New Testament.¹⁶ Moreover, he has later confessed, "I have tried to show that 'technique' is a realization, hence an achievement, hence an increase, of the spirit of power."¹⁷ "All technique is a function of power...That power, however, is not man's, it remains extrinsic to him."¹⁸ For Ellul, the sequence of the manifestation of power does not appear to be the spirit of power arises in man first and then there is realization of power in the objective world later. Rather, because of his conviction of the antecedence of spiritual power in biblical revelation, he understands that there is first the incarnation of powers, then the necessity for the growth of power arises, and finally there is manifested the human spirit of power.¹⁹ In fact, it is his basic understanding that the world consists of powers incarnating in cultural elements or domains like money, politics, and technique.²⁰

¹⁵ Ellul, *Money and Power*, pp.75-76.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.75-76. Also see Jacques Ellul, "Notes preliminaires sur 'église et pouvoirs'", *Foi et Vie*, vol. 71, nos. 2-3 (March-June 1972), pp. 2-24, especially pp.11-18.

¹⁷ Ellul, *The Technological System*, p.69. For clarity and consistency's sake we shall depart from the translator's practice of rendering 'la technique' as 'technology', and render 'la technique' as 'technique', just as John Wilkinson in the translation of Ellul's *The Technological Society* has done. In some occasion we shall even use the French 'la technique' to emphasize the original emphasis. For we believe that only in maintaining the French understanding of 'la technique' can we finally comprehend Ellul's analysis.

¹⁸ See Jacques Ellul, "The Power of Technique and the Ethics of Non-power", tr. Mary Lydon, in Kathleen Woodward (ed.), *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, (Madison, WI: Coda, 1980), pp. 242-247, especially p. 244.

¹⁹ See Jacques Ellul, "'The World' in the Gospels", tr. James S. Albritton, *Katallagete: Be Reconciled*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 16-23, especially p.19. See also Jacques Ellul, "Lust for Power", tr. the Monks of New Skete (Cambridge, New York), *Katallagete: Be Reconciled*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Fall 1979), pp.30-33, especially p.31, "Thus increase of power comes about in our society by the union of the *means* of exercising force with the spirit of power."

²⁰ Ellul, "'The World' in the Gospels", p.18. Ellul, "Lust for Power", pp.30-31, also mentions the three powers. Indeed in "'The World' in the Gospels", p.22, he even states that "the

Thus Ellul tries to theorize that technique ('la technique' in French) verges on becoming an autonomous spiritual power. This means that the problems of this theological pre-understanding are now translated into problems of cultural analysis, of defining technique and spelling out its characterology. In order to theorize technique as a spiritual power, Ellul has to show that all kinds of techniques indeed form an integrated domain in our civilization, and that this integrated whole is autonomous, a law unto itself, modifying other cultural domains while itself progresses according to its inherent logic or tendency, with a life of its own. The passage in *p.93* reveals this theological understanding well,

technical elements combine among themselves, and they do so more and more spontaneously...In this sense it is possible to speak of the "reality" of technique--with its own substance, its own particular mode of being, and a life independent of our power of decision. The evolution of techniques then becomes exclusively causal; it loses all finality...In reality, it is not the "wishes" of the "producers" which control, but the technical necessity of production which forces itself on the consumers...The belief that the human producer is still master of production is a dangerous illusion...Technique is organized as a closed world...The bond that unites the fragmentary actions and disjointedness of individuals, co-ordinating and systematizing their work, is no longer a human one, but the internal laws of technique (bold type ours).

And the description in the following *p.94*, elevating technique as the

world is...a rebellious power". On the incarnation of powers, see Ellul, "The Ethics of Nonpower", tr. Nada K. Levy, in Melvin Kranzberg (ed.), *Ethics in an Age of Pervasive Technology*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1980), pp. 204-212, esp. pp.206-207, "power itself has a dual character. First of all, it is extrinsic. It is not part of man; it is not embodied in him. It is a power that rests in the new human environment", and Ellul, "The Power of Technique and the Ethics of Non-power", p.244, "the problem of power is not simply the result of a certain will to power...It exists today only as a result of means, it is inscribed in a world of means."

subject, is incomprehensible unless one remembers this theological pre-understanding of spiritual power,

Technique reigns alone, a blind force and more clear-sighted than the best human intelligence...technique modifies whatever it touches, but it is itself untouchable...technique traces its own limits and fashions its own image...technique remains self-identical in its characteristics and its course...There is no hope of seeing it change into a fine and gracious being.

In the light of this theological pre-understanding, it is not difficult to understand how Ellul comes up with his list of characteristics of modern technique, which are de facto expansions of this pre-understanding: automatism of technical choice(pp.79-85), self-augmentation(pp.85-94), monism(pp.94-111), the necessary linking together of technique(pp.111-116), technical universalism(pp.116-133), and finally, the autonomy of technique(pp.133-147). Step by step Ellul wants to show that modern technique has become an autonomous power in its own right. Should this characterology²¹ be valid, we must then be convinced that technique is indeed the power Ellul visualizes. However, not only is this characterology rather uneven and fraught with problems and difficulties, but Ellul's analysis has been problematic from the very beginning, in the very act of defining technique as a monistic cultural domain.

4.3.2.1) Defining Technique instead of Technology

To start with, Ellul tries to define technique (in French, 'la technique') as the *"totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for*

²¹ Although this word is specially coined for the book we shall retain it because it aptly conveys the sense that Ellul is giving a discourse on technique's characteristics.

a given stage of development) in every field of human activity" (p.xxv, bold type ours, cf. p.13, p.19). Here we can immediately note two points. Firstly, he locates technique in every field of human activity. This immediately stretches the domain of technique as extensive as the whole civilization. Secondly, he defines technique in terms of means and methods for action (p.19, p.97). These two points immediately call to mind E. B. Tylor's definition of culture or civilization. For Tylor also speaks of culture or civilization as that complex whole of capabilities²², which is rather similar to Ellul's definition of technique as that totality of methods and means in all fields of human activity. Like Tylor, Ellul anchors his definition of technique at the level of action and therefore of power.

It must be noted here that Ellul tries to delineate the scope of analysis according to the French term 'la technique'²³ rather than the English term 'technology'. This has caused serious confusions and misunderstanding because the English 'technology' refers to a relatively well-defined cultural domain, as that one which arose when scientific knowledge is applied to improve traditional techniques, or produce new ones, for the betterment of life.²⁴ However, French people has not coined a separate term to cover this particular group of techniques which constitute a new cultural domain, and continues to use the original term to cover both traditional techniques and modern technologies. This leaves the French 'technologie' to harbour the rather restricted connotation of the scientific study of technical processes²⁵. Moreover, Ellul, in his consistency to stress the essence

²² "Culture" in G. Duncan Mitchell (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Sociology* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 45-47.

²³ In this section of linguistic discussion we shall use the single quotation mark to highlight the terms we discuss as linguistic terms.

²⁴ Here obviously we are using the word 'science' and its adjective 'scientific' in the English way, denoting the domains of physical sciences unless specified otherwise.

²⁵ Ellul, *The Technological System*, p.26.

of technique, has also branded many more cultural domains that are strongly technical in nature as 'les techniques'²⁶, since these domains also arose through the application of 'scientific' or rigorous method.²⁷

With all these in view, it is clear why Ellul has tried to define 'la technique' much wider than 'technology', for in his understanding the English term 'technology' has needlessly restricted the understanding of 'la technique'.²⁸ For Ellul and the French people, what English calls 'technology' are simply modern techniques as compared to traditional ones.

The problem for the English reader, then, is rather complicated. In order to comprehend Ellul's understanding of 'la technique', he has to shift between the English terms 'technique' and 'technology', yet he will find neither to be

²⁶ From what we can gather from *The Technological Society*, Ellul has enumerated techniques in nearly every field of cultural activity: for primitive societies, magic(p.24) and, for modern society, besides "*mechanical and... intellectual technique*", there are three more subdivisions: "*economic technique...the technique of organization ...human technique*" (p.22). Here, the technique of organization (see also p.12, p.193) belongs to one of the social techniques, which were perfected by Rome(pp.29-30). Other social techniques include "*judicial technique*" (p.75), "*administrative ...and psychological*" techniques(p.101). Some of the techniques may be further subdivided, as economic techniques can be subdivided into that of observation (p.163) and that of action(p.171), or into that of production and that of consumption(p.65). And there are still others: artistical and musical techniques(p.130), "*religious...and financial*" techniques(p.31), "*commercial, industrial, and transportation techniques*"(p.112), "*technique of city planning, technique of amusement, motion-picture industry*" for big city(p.113), "*techniques of the state--military, police, administrative, and political*"(p.115), and so "*techniques of propaganda, education and psychic manipulation*"(p.115, cf. p.125, pp.14-15). Finally, what is paramount, Ellul enumerates planning as "*the technical method*"(p.184, cf. p.13, p.112). See also the more comprehensive enumeration in p.253.

²⁷ Contrary to footnote no. 21 above, here 'scientific' means pertaining to a rigorous discipline.

²⁸ In this light Robert K. Merton's understanding of Ellul's 'la technique' as "*any complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined result*" (p.vi) has certainly grasped Ellul's original emphasis.

satisfactory.²⁹ To render 'la technique' as 'technique' looks like a literal translation, but, as we have analyzed above, the English 'technique' in fact does not cover what the French 'la technique' means. In order to comprehend what Ellul means, he has to combine traditional techniques, modern techniques developed from science, and any number of cultural domains that are either derived from traditional techniques, or are newly developed technical domains. His enumeration of techniques has confirmed that he is delineating a cultural domain of 'la technique' that is much more extensive than the cultural domain of technology.

This amounts to a realignment of terms, which results in a cultural-linguistic hurdle difficult to be overcome. Ellul himself has tried to overcome this in the translation of his first and second works. Yet his and the translators' efforts have resulted in confusion rather than success.³⁰ When the English word 'technique' without the definite article constantly appears in the translation of Ellul's works, what usually appears in the mind of the English-speaking readers will be individual means of action which are still very much bound up with the human subject, which must be acquired through tradition and practice; while the

²⁹ Such shifting has been well reflected in the translations themselves. See John Wilkinson's rendering of 'la technique' as 'technique', but his rendering of the title of the original French edition *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* as *The Technological Society*. And Joachim Neugroschel's renders 'la technique' as 'technology' in *The Technological System*, with the permission of Ellul himself (Ellul, *The Technological System*, p.33). Yet Geoffrey Bromiley returns to the practice of John Wilkinson in his translation of *The Technological Bluff*. Certainly, this is also mandated by Ellul's taking the analysis of technique to the discourse level, to techno-'logy', as we have pointed out in our Section 4.3.1.2.

³⁰ See footnote no. 25 above on the translators' shifting stances. For Ellul's attempts at clarifying the picture, see Ellul, *The Technological Society*, "Note to the Reader", p.xxv, and his *The Technological System*, pp. 23-33. See also the translator's discussion in Ellul's *The Betrayal of the West*, tr. Matthew J. O'Connell, (New York: Seabury, 1978, original French edition 1975), p.136, "Ellul's use of *technique* and (*société*) *technicienne* continues to create difficulty for the translator, since "technology" is not usually an adequate rendering of technique as he understands it, while "technique" and "technical" for the noun and adjective respectively can be quite misleading. It should be sufficient to recall Ellul's "Note to the Reader" in *The Technological Society*..."

French term with the definite article in the original edition calls to mind many more objective forms of technical know-how that have become independent of the human subject, for when Ellul uses 'la technique' he is clearly not stressing on the human-bound traditional techniques. He is either pointing to modern scientific forms of technical know-how in technology, or to those technical cultural domains which are external to the human subject, or both.³¹ Thus the English readers, advised by Ellul to abandon the English term 'technology' when trying to understand his works, will have difficulties visualizing human-bound 'techniques' as independent power, while Ellul and other Frenchmen will be bewildered by the English readers' inability to visualize 'la technique' with an independent reality of its own.

Moreover, Ellul tends to use the term in the abstract singular, stressing technique's common essence rather than referring to any concrete particular techniques. Surely, he is aware of the difference among different techniques. "*We observe...techniques may be very different in kind and not necessarily similar one to another as techniques.*" (p.22) Thus he posits their commonness in that they "*have the same goal and preoccupation...and are thus related...The three subdivisions show the wide extent of the technical phenomenon...There is no field where technique is not dominant.*" (p.22) Still, his way of using the term incurs the need for the readers to imagine a common technical essence among them, as well as to 'earth' the abstract term onto one or all of the three concrete connotations every time it appears.

4.3.2.2) *Technique's Characterology in terms of Its Nature as an Autonomous Power*

³¹ It is in fact rather strange for an English reader to read a book which constantly invokes 'technique' in the general and in the abstract, as one will find throughout Ellul's *The Technological Society*, without reference to any concrete traditional techniques which are always linked to the human subject.

But why does Ellul want to delineate a comprehensive domain of technique with an abstract common essence? Besides this as the cultural preference of a Frenchman, we also believe that this is prompted by Ellul's theological understanding that 'la technique' is a spiritual power. For the technological domain, no matter how powerful, is only one cultural domain among others. But technique as a cultural substratum is present in all fields of cultural activity. This pervasive understanding of technique has prompted him to maintain an extreme thesis that 'la technique' is the determining factor in modern society and culture. We shall now analyze how this theological pre-understanding has severely influenced his characterology of technique, especially its central thesis, namely, the autonomy of technique.

4.3.2.3) *Ellul's Pretension of Technique as an Abstract Subject*

To begin with, one easily observes that throughout the characterology Ellul has consistently invoked it as an abstract subject in the singular. Thus it is frequent to encounter statements which have the form "Technique does this, technique does that" without referring to any concrete technique and as though this abstract technique possesses subjectivity.³² In our opinion, such peculiar language are of a piece with his definition of technique as an integrated domain

³² As early as pp.4-6 there is already such statements like
 p.4, "technique has taken over all of man's activities, not just his productive activity...technique transforms...";
 p.5, "Old houses...were torn down; and the new world technique required was built...Technique has enough of the mechanical in its nature to enable it to cope with the machine...Technique integrates the machine into society. It constructs the kind of world the machine needs and introduces order...It clarifies, arranges, and rationalizes; it does in the domain of the abstract what the machine did in the domain of labor. It is efficient and brings efficiency to everything"; and
 p.6, "Technique integrates...adapts...changes...specifies attitudes."

Sometimes such statements are so strong as to become conspiratorial statements carrying an intense intentionality, "True technique will know how to maintain the illusion of liberty, choice, and individuality; but these will have been carefully calculated so that they will be integrated into the mathematical reality merely as appearances." (p.139)

with an abstract common essence. Moreover, they also show that Ellul's theological pre-understanding that technique as a totality is a spiritual power has already been everywhere in this characterology, so much so that it would not be unfair to take this characterology as an exposition of this theological pre-understanding. This certainly raises the question of Ellul having reached the conclusion before he can even produce the argument. His manner of building up his case does present difficulties to anyone who wants to analyze it. It also means that if his notion of technique as an autonomous power is unsound, then we shall find a host of problems throughout this characterology.

4.3.2.4) *Establishing Technique's Self-deliberation in*

'Automatism of Technical Choice' and 'Self-augmentation'

Ellul first advances the idea that technique can deliberate and produce action in the section on *'Automatism of Technical Choice'* (pp.79-85), via a kind of technical necessity based on maximum efficiency, *"Technical automatism may not be judged or questioned; immediate use must be found for the most recent, efficient, and technical process."*(p.81) With this automatism technique technicizes all activity, producing a kind of technical milieu in the world (pp.83-84). Thus starting from a rather preliminary consideration of automatism Ellul hastily lands on a notion of technical necessity, with a technical slavery or a technical totalitarianism looming in the horizon.

And, after spelling out technical automatism the self-augmentation of technique is in view (pp.85-94). In fact Ellul is a bit unsure of this characteristic of self-augmentation, so that he initially announces that, *"At the present time, technique...is being transformed and is progressing almost without decisive intervention by man."* (p.85, bold type ours) For him, the mechanism of technical progress lies in *"the accretion of manifold minute details, all tending to perfect*

the ensemble", which is much more decisive than the intervention of the individual" (p.86), so much so that "this collective, anonymous research advances techniques almost everywhere in the world by a like impulse" (p.86). After disagreeing "that mechanical augmentation is decelerating" (p.89), he asserts that "we are simply in another phase of technical progress: the phase of assimilation, organization, and conquest of the other areas" (p.89). For Ellul, "it is the principle of the combination of techniques which causes self-augmentation" (p.89). With this understanding of the mechanism and principle of technical self-augmentation, he announces, "What is it that determines this progression today? We can no longer argue that it is an economic or a social condition, or education, or any other human factor. Essentially, the preceding technical situation alone is determinative." (p.90) Here Ellul is passing from prediction to reality, posing his own prediction as the reality that has not yet materialized, namely, that technique self-augments without the intervention of human agency.

4.3.2.5) Establishing the Common Essence of Technique in Technical Identity in 'Technical Monism' or 'Unity'³³

The self-augmentation of technique must depend on the notion that all

³³ The French terms Ellul used for monism is 'unicité ou insécabilité'. See Ellul, *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, p.87. As both French terms do not have any direct English cognates, the translator has to render them as 'monism' (p.94). However, he immediately adds a note that "'Holism' might have been better. In any case, the accumulated philosophical baggage of both these terms must be rejected and the meaning of the term understood contextually." (p.94) Miller, when studying Ellul, has adopted a suggested rendering of 'indivisibility'. See Duane R. Miller, *The Effect of Technology upon Humanization in the Thought of Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul* (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1970), p.172, footnote 3. Ellul, however, has switched to the French term 'unité' when he reworked on this character in *The Technological System* (p.156), which was then readily translated into its English cognate 'unity'. For us, we shall use the renderings 'unity' and 'monism' interchangeably, although judging from the way in which Ellul expounds this character, it seems to us that as a whole 'monism' is indeed the best translation. It best conveys the sense that technique for Ellul is one single autonomous entity not able to be dialectically controlled or informed by other beings or forces, which means that it is not only a unity, but a monistic unity. It readily leads us to characterize Ellul's critical analysis of technique as one great 'monistic' reduction. See our Section 4.3.5.3, 4.3.5.4, and 4.3.5.6.

techniques can form an integrated domain. This he tries to do in the section on technical monism or unity (pp.94-111).

By technical monism or unity Ellul means that *"the technical phenomenon, embracing all the separate techniques, forms a whole"* (p.94), *"presenting a formidable unity in all its parts, which are inseparable"* (p.98, bold type ours). This technical monism, for Ellul, is further based on a kind of ontological technical identity, which *"is the primary mark of that thoroughgoing unity which makes the technical phenomenon a single essence despite the extreme diversity of its appearances"* (p.95), for *"the technical phenomenon presents, everywhere and essentially, the same characteristics. It is useless to look for differentiations. The common features...are so sharply drawn that it is easy to discern that which is the technical phenomenon and that which is not."* (pp.94-95)

4.3.2.6) Predicting Technique as an Integrated Domain

*in 'The Necessary Linking Together of Technique' or 'Totalization'*³⁴

But Ellul has yet to demonstrate that historically speaking all techniques link together out of this ontological identity to form a whole, so that technical monism or unity can really be established. Thus Ellul has to put forth another necessary characteristic which will sooner or later enable this linking to happen. For want of a better term, he has called this *"The Necessary Linking Together of Technique"* (p.111-116), though in the second work he renames this as *"Totalization"*³⁵, which means that all techniques must link together into a total system.³⁶

³⁴ In French 'Entraînement des techniques', see Ellul, *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, p.102.

³⁵ Ellul, *The Technological System*, pp.199-204.

³⁶ See p.125, *"Technique cannot be otherwise than totalitarian."*

In a sense this characteristic repeats what Ellul has already put forth as the *"spontaneous combination of technical elements"* (p.93) in the section on self-augmentation. Here Ellul proceeds with a historical account of the proliferation of non-mechanical techniques under the stimulus of machine technique (pp.111-116). He points out a technical necessity (p.116), with previous techniques engendering new ones, forming a system that *"perfects and completes itself unremittingly"*, so much so that Ellul can find *"no principle of a different social organization that would not be founded on technical necessity."* (p.116). Thus the society will sooner or later become a national concentration camp.³⁷ Obviously, this section has already landed on a notion of technical totalitarianism that anticipates the notion of technical autonomy.

4.3.2.7) *Concluding Technique as the Most Extensive Domain in Civilization in 'Technical Universalism'*

For Ellul, technical unity and totalization finally culminates in a **technical universalism** (pp.116-133). For him, it is logical that techniques which form into a totalitarian system spread everywhere and conquer the whole world, that is, become universal. Thus technique will form a domain as extensive as the universal set, the anthropological totality, namely, human civilization. This characterization of technical universalism is no more than a last step towards his formal declaration of technique's autonomy. That is why we have already found explicit assertions of technique's autonomy in this section.

In Ellul's eye, technique *"by nature and necessity"* is devoted *"to the universal"* (p.131). His first characterization of technical universalism is

³⁷ See pp.102-103 *"the perfection of police power...The whole structure of society implies it, of necessity. The more we mobilize the forces of nature, the more must we mobilize men and the more do we require order...Technical necessity imposes the national concentration camp."*

geographical (p.116ff). From the geographical perspective he clearly has an eye on the collapse of non-western civilizations(p.121) in their adoption of western technique. Today's cultural differences cannot overcome technical identity, and technical monism will nevertheless express through such apparent 'differences'(p.131).

What is more strange is that he has also branded adoption of western political and economic institutions as an adoption of western techniques, so that his description amounts to an analysis of these cultures' westernization process. This means that his notion of technical universalism is of a piece with his terminology, namely, that 'la technique' is co-extensive with the whole civilization, and that all cultural domains are essentially nothing but technique.³⁸ This inevitably leads to a further notion of reductionistic universalism, in which technique has "*mastered all the elements of civilization*"(p.127) and become universal within a civilization, wherein all cultural domains will become pure technique. Thus a "*technical civilization*" is formed, which is "*constructed by technique, for technique, and is exclusively technique*" (p.128). This universal "*objective*" (p.131) technique refers both to technology and to all other technical cultural domains rather than to traditional techniques. Here we have very explicit statements by Ellul that "*technique is itself civilization*"(p.126, p.130), that "*the essence of civilization is thus absorbed*"(p.129, cf. p.318).

4.3.2.8) Formal Description of an Autonomous Power

- The Crux of Ellul's Characterology in "*The Autonomy of Technique*"

After all these preceding characterizations Ellul comes to the most difficult

³⁸ Thus after describing non-western cultures' adoption of western politics and economics(pp.123-124, *bold type ours*), he nevertheless says, "*In all areas, then, technique is producing the rapid collapse of all other civilizations.*" (p.124, *bold type ours*).

and controversial characterization of technique, namely, its autonomy (pp.133-147). Ellul has early on stated, *"technique has become autonomous...fashion an omnivorous world which obeys its own laws...no longer rests on tradition, but rather on previous technical procedures."* (p.14) Thus hints of this autonomy is everywhere throughout his characterology. What Ellul describes as technical autonomy is that technique is a closed world where its own norm and value of efficiency operates(p.133)³⁹. And the following passage in pp.133-134 best summarizes what Ellul visualizes as the state of technical autonomy:

First, technique is autonomous with respect to economics and politics...neither economic nor political evolution conditions technical progress. Its progress is likewise independent of the social situation...It is the prime mover of all the rest...to the contrary and in spite of human pride, which pretends that man's philosophical theories are still determining influences and man's political regimes decisive factors in technical evolution. External necessities no longer determine technique.....Technique's own internal necessities are determinative. Technique has become a reality in itself, self-sufficient, with its special laws and its own determinations...Morality...has nothing to say. Only technical criteria are relevant...freed from this principal obstacle to human action...it has put itself beyond good and evil, it need fear no limitation whatever...The power and autonomy of technique are so well secured that it...has become the judge of what is moral, the creator of a new morality. Thus it plays the role of creator of a new civilization ...in respect to traditional morality, technique affirms itself as an independent

³⁹ In this autonomy, efficiency is the sole norm and value of technique(p.20), and technical autonomy means that *"technical progress today is no longer conditioned by anything other than its own calculus of efficiency."* (p.74) Its autonomy from man is shown in that man has to comply with this norm of efficiency, *"he can decide only in favor of the technique that gives the maximum efficiency."* (p.80).

power...It is truly autonomous.

However, technique cannot assert its autonomy in respect to physical or biological laws. Instead, it puts them to work; it seeks to dominate them.

In the above passage Ellul points to technique's independent reality, to its determination by its own internal necessities. He also puts this autonomy into a cultural perspective. He pushes the meaning of this autonomy to mean that, not only is technique as a cultural domain autonomous with respect to other domains, but technique in turn is the prime mover of these other domains, and of the whole civilization. More importantly, technique is autonomous with respect to man and morality.

In this passage one can also detect the close relation between Ellul's understanding of technique as spiritual power and his understanding of its autonomy. The passage in p.140 is even more telling, *"Technical autonomy explains the "specific weight" with which technique is endowed...It is a power endowed with its own peculiar force. It refracts in its own specific sense the wills which make use of it and the ends proposed for it. Indeed, independently of the objectives that man pretends to assign to any given technical means, that means always conceals in itself a finality."* Thus we can conclude that his characterology of technique is trying to develop an analysis of power, with efficiency as the central value of the power domain.

4.3.3) Preliminary Criticism - Cultural-historical Conditioning of Ellul's Analysis of Technique

How are we going to criticize this characterology of technique? To begin with, Ellul's analysis was spelt out in a cultural-historical epoch, firstly Nazism and secondly the post-Nazi world which was characterized by the Cold War

confrontation between Communist and democratic countries. It was evident that he wanted to stake technique as the real problem, if not the real culprit, of western civilization, and therefore of the whole world.⁴⁰

However, we also detect that it was in the Cold War confrontation that Ellul has got many wrong facts or partial facts, or has simply fallen prey to Communist propaganda, so much so that many of these adduced 'facts' on the technical situation in Communist countries were, with the advantage of hindsight, proved wrong. For example, it was one of his basic contentions, back in the late 1950's, that technique itself will render all countries or civilizations more or less the same, at least technically speaking.⁴¹ With the collapse of communism, the collapse of centralized economy, and the stark backwardness of communist technology, such a contention is obviously untenable. Although some of the cultural-historical facts Ellul adduced were purely accidental, many others did go into his arguments and affected his characterology.

Thus, for example, the technical success of communism in the 1950's has certainly given an impression of an apparent technical automatism, which in fact was due largely to overwhelming state support from the communist regime due to its materialistic and technocratic tendency. Yet unfortunately many examples which Ellul cites in the section on technical automatism and throughout the characterology come from such communist regimes (*pp. 79-85*). Ellul's handling of such examples is insensitive to the reality of political and economic determinations within them. As a whole, Ellul's analysis was carried out at a

⁴⁰ The original French title of *The Technological Society*, namely, *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* literally means that technique is the stake of the century.

⁴¹ See p.78, "Technique has been extended geographically so that it covers the whole earth...Moreover, technique has become objective and is transmitted like a physical thing; it leads thereby to a certain unity of civilization, regardless of the environment or the country in which it operates."

stage when the world was still largely bathed in an atmosphere of technological optimism. The 1950's and 1960's were still times when the down side of technology was not yet apparent, when people were still caught in the unlimited possibilities and advantages of technologies. It was the age of space exploration. Therefore, what Ellul has characterized as the self-augmentation (*pp.85-94*) of technique was in fact based on an intense cultural-historical optimism in technology. And Ellul has mistaken such cultural-historical augmentation of technology as belonging to the very nature of technique.

Certainly, such criticisms may be unfair to Ellul, for all cultural-historical analyses would have similar problems of 'facts' being cultural-historically conditioned. With more than thirty years' hindsight, we certainly can adduce many more empirical facts to strengthen our criticisms. However, some of Ellul's analysis was so blatantly wrong that there is reason to doubt the very philosophical rigor of his theorization. Ellul has confessed that he was a man of the Left. Although he has been severely critical of them⁴² one still wonders whether he has still been too gullible to Communist boasting or propaganda. More importantly, we are forced to suspect whether his political stance has not caused him to shy away from diagnosing the real problem of the world in the more conventional political framework, and to seek it elsewhere, thus landing unaware on the barren field of technical determinism.

4.3.4) Material Criticism I

- Criticizing the Concept and Terminology of 'La Technique'

Therefore, we have to proceed to more substantial criticisms of his analysis of technique. In our opinion, the cultural-historical conditioning is only

⁴² Jacques Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, (New York: Seabury, 1978, original French edition 1975).

accidental to his analysis, and is occasioned by faulty analysis at a deeper level. It lies in the way the very term technique is used, which neither does justice to the rise of the domain of technology, nor to the rise of other unique cultural domains.

4.3.4.1) The Growth of the Technological Domain and the Relationship between Technique and Technology

Surely, when man engages in all kinds of cultural activities, the need for action spurs the development of all kinds of know-how or means of action. That is why techniques were ubiquitous in all fields of activity. Yet they existed separately in different domains as a basic aspect(*p.128*). And man's attitude towards such know-how or means of action would be very much determined by the dominant cultural ethos, as Ellul himself has shown with regard to the case of Greece(*pp.27-29*), Rome(*pp.29-32*), Christian Europe(*pp.32-38*), and the Reformation period(*pp.38-42*).

But with the rise of science particular groups of techniques were singled out and subjected to systematic study and development. Thus the domain of technology was formed. People have begun adopting new 'non-human-bound forms of techniques' or technologies in every field, while at the same time subjecting traditional techniques in other domains to similar systematic development. Yet there are still traditional techniques unable to be technologized. These were marginalized or simply replaced by technology. Thus there is in fact an antagonism between externalized technology and human-bound traditional techniques. When all these consequences are taken together, a new relationship between this new cultural domain and the cultural constant of technique emerges. The net effect is that people would turn to technology when they want to tackle the problems of technique, for it is this domain that is really coherent and able to absorb discrete techniques into its sphere. It contains the best and worst

possibilities for the development of techniques. From now on technique will be increasingly superseded in people's consciousness by the dominance of upcoming technologies. In summary, technique remains to be a basic aspect of human cultural activity while technology becomes the cultural domain that purposefully develops it. The coining of 'technology' in English points precisely to the growth of this new cultural domain.

Therefore, even if Ellul's use of the French term 'la technique' cannot be challenged due to cultural reasons, the reception of his analysis in the English-speaking world does become problematic. This world includes most newly developed countries, which have developed the technological domain after the United States and adopted the English understanding of 'technology'. This adoption was widespread in the post-war world, and has become more pervasive after the computer revolution started in the 1980's in the United States. People are now accustomed to speak of technologies when they want to refer to all kinds of scientific know-how or means of action, while the word 'techniques' takes a back-seat, referring mainly to common means of action that are human-bound and still preserved by traditional culture, not yet subjected to systematic scientific development, or to discrete set of means or know-how within a certain technology. Therefore, the English word 'technique' does not come to denote modern technologies as well as traditional techniques, as the French equivalent, joined by the definite article (i.e., 'la technique'), does.

In this light it may well be asked whether this linguistic usage does not reflect an important reality. Do not people's negligence of techniques and awareness of technologies raise the question forcefully that, at least in English usage, techniques across the board should not be taken as one cultural domain? If they are being taken as one cultural domain, then this would be a very loose and minimal one, which only coheres as far as the concept and reality of the word 'technique' can sustain. Rather, technology (or technologies) must now be taken

to denote a new cultural domain (or a group of sub-domains) in which all kinds of techniques gain their development.

Moreover, with techniques increasingly bound up with their scientific development within various technologies, it becomes increasingly difficult to designate modern techniques separately from the scientific study of them.⁴³ That is to say, it becomes increasingly untenable to designate, as the French language does, the technical know-how with one term ('la technique') and the scientific study of it with another ('technologie').⁴⁴

Finally, it is also in this technological domain that discourse on technique develops. All these characteristics reinforce our contention that it is technology rather than technique that constitutes a coherent cultural domain. With the ability of the term 'technology' to take up the further connotation of being discursive, even Ellul himself has to adopt the qualifier 'technologique' in his third book on technique.⁴⁵ That means, all in all, the English term 'technology' succeeds far better in designating the state of affairs after this technological domain has arisen. That is also why Ellul's use of 'la technique' in fact get closer and closer to the sense of 'technology' rather than traditional techniques.⁴⁶

⁴³ As Raymond Williams has shown, there was before that no such domain as technology, as techniques in civilization were not subjected to systematic study as such. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (London: Fontana & Flamingo, 1983), pp. 315-316.

⁴⁴ Here we suggest that the relationship between techniques and technology may become clearer if we bifurcate the translation of 'la technique' in Ellul's works into 'technique' and 'technology' according to the context.

⁴⁵ The original French title of *The Technological Bluff* is *Le bluff technologique*. See *The Technological Bluff*. See our footnote no. 7.

⁴⁶ See Ellul, *The Technological System* and *The Technological Bluff*. A notable exception is the latter part of *The Technological Society*, in which Ellul formally deals with technique's relation to economics and politics. There, 'la technique' also refers to techniques in such domains.

As to Ellul's way of defining 'la technique', there is much to be said for it. It draws attention to the technical aspect in all fields of cultural activity, and awakes us to the technical mentality that is widespread nowadays (*pp.19-21*). It is also generally true that this "*technical state of mind*" (*p.111*) causes us to focus on all kinds of techniques in every field of cultural activity, so much so that Ellul can talk of a civilization that can be characterized as technical (*p.21*). But as we have just discussed, this way of defining 'la technique' does not do justice to the rise of the domain of technology. An extensive but diffused definition of 'la technique' fails to reveal the intricate relationship between traditional techniques and the new cultural domain of technology.

4.3.4.2) The Birth of New Technical Domains and Their Nature as Cultural Domains

A further terminological problem in Ellul's analysis has to do with why he has branded many human activities, say, advertising, psychotherapy, management, banking, accounting, urban planning, and even law etc. as 'les techniques' (*p.253*). Although Ellul's definition has served to highlight the technical nature of all such activities, we must ask why these activities are not characterized as 'such-and-such techniques' in ordinary language.

This question is related to the larger problem of delineating cultural domains. Here we understand that a cultural domain is a field of human activity which tackles a particular dimension or aspect of human existence in the world. Although other fields of human activity may have encountered this dimension it is only in this domain that the particular dimension is tackled. Each domain is developed by particular ethnic or cultural groups in different cultural-historical milieux. This said, it is easily imaginable that all domains will have their intrinsic norms and logic, plus their particular cultural-historical traditions. Each will also have its own specific goals and values according to the nature of the dimension

it tackles. Otherwise, they will not constitute distinct domains in the first place. As to its technical aspect, each domain's specific norms, values, goals and logic will in turn influence this aspect, and develop its own specific techniques. Therefore, it is obviously not true that techniques in all domains will have absolute efficiency (p.xxv) as its sole value.

This said, the rise of the technological domain is certainly instrumental in spurring the proliferation of new cultural domains, as dimensions of human existence that have hitherto been unable to be tackled can now be tackled. It is the ascendancy of the technological domain, not traditional human-bound techniques themselves, that set off the technical mentality.⁴⁷ With the success of machines, man had to develop new cultural domains, say, management, to enhance the utilization of machines. Such new or reinvented domains obviously would possess their own technical aspect, which would be very much influenced by the technological domain. In short, with the growth of technology, traditional techniques are technologized, old cultural domains are reinvented as technicized domains, and new technical cultural domains are formed.

Yet even though they may utilize technology, even though their formations are due to the same technical and scientific mentality, even though the value of efficiency from technology may loom large in their particular sets of values, it does not mean that they and technology belong together as one super domain. The technical aspect as a constitutive aspect of all domains is the necessary but not the sufficient condition for the formation of a new domain. Each domain arises

⁴⁷ See p.45, "scientific revolution began as early as the first half of the seventeenth century...Moreover, a psychological transformation occurred which led to the consideration of phenomena as worthy of study in themselves. This prepared the way for technical progress...Then he deliberately oriented his research toward a scientific discovery that could be applied technically". It is 'technology', which means the scientific study of technical know-how, not 'la technique', which can only mean the technical know-how in itself, that sets off the technical mentality.

differently and is therefore unique. Obviously, with their own specific goals, they do not tackle technique directly. Even though they may be technically similar, they are domainally speaking different, for they serve different 'masters'. And even in the technical aspect, they still retain their uniqueness, for they will develop new techniques specific to their domainal nature, which will remain distinct and separated from the technological domain.

Thus analyzed, it becomes clear why people do not take such technical cultural domains as part of the domain of technique in ordinary conversation, for this would not do justice to their nature as unique domains. Should Ellul extend more philosophical considerations to the formation of cultural domains, this domainal delineation of 'la technique' would not be advanced at all. Each cultural domain will have its own cultural specificity, and therefore autonomy, at the particular aspect or dimension it tackles. Ellul's definition is in fact an attempt to visualize the integration of the whole civilization at the technical level. This is a bold and insightful attempt, but it is not very successful.⁴⁸ There exists a vast difference between technology and such domains. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze them separately. To fail to do so would result in a kind of technical reductionism of all cultural domains.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Although Ellul brands organization, management and planning as technique, his analysis does not really tackle sufficiently the problems in each of these domains, which belong to a higher level of human manipulation, of the manipulation of man not at the physical but psycho-social level. It suffices to recognize that such domains harbour a technical mentality, but they are similar with technology only at this point. See *Chapter III, "Technique and Economy"*, pp.148-227. Therefore, his analysis eventually leaves the intrinsic problems of such domains untouched.

⁴⁹ See p.9, *"Where does biological technique begin and where does it end? In modern psychology and sociology, what can we call technique, since in the application of these sciences everything is technique?...it is economic technique which forms the very substance of economic thought."* This passage shows that Ellul has unjustifiably reduced biology to biological technique, psychology and sociology to their particular techniques, economics to its particular techniques. The phrase *"in the application of these sciences"* in fact gives rise to a self-defeating tautology, for whoever would think that technologies or modern techniques are not the application of these 'sciences'? Yet if technologies or modern techniques are the applications of these sciences, then such sciences in their unapplied state are something else, not totally techniques or technologies.

Therefore, although we do not urge that Ellul must prefer the English term 'technology' rather than 'la technique', so long as he keeps using the French term with the definite article to refer to concrete modern technical know-how rather than traditional techniques (the qualifier 'modern' can be used to enhance this sense), it is of utmost importance that he steers the term clear of those technical cultural domains that took rise from the scientific method, thus avoiding unnecessary monistic reductionistic understanding of the whole civilization.

4.3.5) Material Criticism II - Criticizing the Characterology of Technique in the Light of Cultural Domainal Analysis

How does Ellul's characterology of technique look in the light of our criticisms of his problematic terminology? We shall see that his attempt towards establishing technique as a coherent autonomous cultural domain, which will eventually subject all human activities to its heteronomy, has largely failed. Here the crucial problem is his extreme thesis that 'la technique' is the determining factor in modern society and culture. This thesis, prompted by his problematic terminology, produces a characterology which is insensitive to the mutual influences and determinations between technology and other cultural domains, resulting in a technical reductionism of the whole civilization. The failure of this characterology also reveals the untenability of his theological pre-understanding of technique as a spiritual power.

In a certain sense it is true that technique is the determining factor of all domains, but at the technical level, i.e., the level of means only. This in fact is a tautology, for every cultural domain will certainly be determinative of all other domains when the latter domains enter into the dimension of existence the former one tackles. Therefore, it is at the technical level that technique and technology intersect with other domains, that the domains influenced follow not their own norms and values but the norms and values of the domain of technology. On the

other hand, the technological domain will also be determined by these other domains at the levels or dimensions pertaining to them. An adequate cultural analysis on technology will be to look at the mutual influence and determinations between technology and these cultural domains. However, the net impression from Ellul's analysis of technique is that all cultural domains are determined by the technical aspect, or by the abstract essential technique that is ubiquitous.

4.3.5.1) *Criticism of Technical Identity and the Resultant Monism of Technique*

In essence, Ellul's characterology of technique tries to amplify what he has set out in the definition of 'la technique'. Thus he tries to establish the single essence of technique, i.e., technical identity, so as to establish the monism or unity (pp.94-111) of a domain of technique. This identity or single essence of techniques, their 'same characteristics' (p.94) or 'common features' (p.94) (see our Section 4.3.2.5) he just assumes to be so obvious that the technical phenomenon as a whole is easily discerned. But then why it is so difficult for ordinary people to visualize this phenomenon? For Ellul, *"The difficulties experienced in the study of technique arise partly from the method to be used and partly from terminology. They do not arise from the phenomenon itself, which is eminently simple to fix..."* (p.95).⁵⁰

This is an overconfident statement that is not careful with reality. Ironically, it is Ellul's terminology and his act of branding all the different cultural domains as one super domain of technique that is difficult for people to understand. Referring to our discussion of the terminology, it is difficult enough

⁵⁰ Cf. Ellul, *The Technological System*, p.157, "The difficulties one may encounter when studying 'technique' are due to one's method, vocabulary, the complexity of the facts, but in no wise to the phenomenon per se, which is eminently simple to take note of." Here again we depart from the translator's rendering and retranslate 'la technique' as 'technique'. See our footnote no. 17.

to posit an ontological technical identity across the broad range of traditional techniques, modern technologies and technical cultural domains. However, Ellul has claimed, *"Just as there are principles common to things as different as a wireless set and an internal-combustion engine, so the organization of an office and the construction of an aircraft have certain identical features."* (p.95) Here, Ellul is positing their 'identical features' as far as the concept of 'la technique' goes. Unfortunately he does not go on to ^{elaborate} ~~emulate~~ these features.⁵¹ We can only gather them from his definition of technique. As Ellul has defined 'la technique' as *"methods rationally arrived at"* (p.xxv) or the *"one best way"* (p.130) we take this to be what he intends as the common essence of technique.

For us, we shall posit techniques' common essence in their manipulability. But no matter whether all techniques have their common essence in rationality, instrumentality, potentiality, manipulability, etc., it is doubtful that this general common essence can allow all the technical cultural domains to be reduced to purely or exclusively techniques, and to cause all their specific techniques to 'form a whole' (p.94), to end up in a 'formidable' technical unity or monism, where 'all its parts...are inseparable' (p.98). In fact, specific techniques, if not imported from the technological domain, still belong properly to the cultural domains in which they develop, according to the different norms and values and logic of each domain. Considering the integrity of cultural domains, it is more natural for techniques specific to a cultural domain to form a domainal unity with other aspects of the same domain. Their domainal characteristics will then be the real technical differences they possess over against their minimal technical identity.

4.3.5.2) Criticisms of the Necessary Linking Together or Totalization of

⁵¹ The latter part of the section on technical monism or unity (pp.94-111) is devoted to arguing the monism or unity between technique and its use, rather than emulating the common features or essence of technique.

Technique

If the common essence or identity of technique can only be established in such a minimal sense, then there is not sufficient ontological reason to support a necessary linking of technique in history.

What Ellul visualizes is the linking of all technical cultural domains, including technology ('*machine technique*', p.111), and the ^{resulting} super system ~~resulted~~ will be as extensive as the civilization. This presents great theoretical difficulties. It is difficult to visualize the formation of such a super system, which "*perfects and completes itself unremittingly*" (p.116), and we have yet to see it ^{happen} ~~realize~~. Even for the technological domain, because of the existence of multiple technologies specific to the problems they tackle, it is still difficult to visualize the linking of all concrete technologies into one giant 'technology' or technological system.⁵² Again, it is the definition put forward by Ellul that causes this difficulty. For if 'la technique' is needlessly defined as a totality (p.xxv), then Ellul can only end up putting forth this notion of totalization.

This shows that it is much more reasonable to start with an open definition of technique without an implicit requirement of totalization, which means expunging the idea of totality from the definition. Then technique as means or "*methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity*" (p.xxv) can be understood as much freer discrete entities specific to the cultural domains which give rise to them. Linking of techniques, either

⁵² Thus, our characterization of technology as a cultural domain hinges on similar developments of physical techniques through different branches of physical sciences, rather than on the formation of one giant technological system, just as politics and economics are cultural domains hinging on their particular types of activity, rather than on the formation of one giant political or economic system. Certainly, our understanding does not rule out the possibility of technology and politics and economics forming a giant system within or among themselves, as we shall discuss below.

within one cultural domain or across domainal boundaries, can still happen, but would be basically contingent and less than total. The conditions for linking would be various. They can either be some ontological affinity⁵³, or teleological association via the common norm or value of efficiency or perfection.⁵⁴ In fact, the linking of techniques happen basically within the domain of technology, but in a much freer manner. Between technology and other cultural domains, there is the infusion of techniques or technologies into these domains, rather than their linking together. In fact, what Ellul describes in *pp.111-116* amounts to a proliferation of other technical cultural domains due to the development of the technological domain, rather than their linking together.

4.3.5.3) *Criticism of Technical Universalism*

Ellul's notions of techniques' unity and their necessary linking together points to a universalism of the super domain of 'la technique', which is as extensive as the civilization. This notion of technical universalism is even more difficult to grasp, and highly problematic. We have just remarked that what happens is rather the infusion of technology into all other cultural domains. This results in a technological universalism. However, the nature of such universalism is starkly different from a technical universalism which Ellul's

⁵³ As it is reasonable to start with an open definition of technique without an implicit requirement of totalization, it is also reasonable not to posit an abstract essence of identity that is more than the definition allows. Therefore, 'techniques' just need to be similarly 'means or methods of action' to allow them to be linked up by the human agent.

⁵⁴ There is one more merit in this open definition, for it would allow human agency a role in the linking of techniques, because this is what actually happens, although this may be due to man's perception of a necessity or advantage in the linking. Moreover, such necessities or advantages may not be technical ones, but non-technical ones arising from various cultural domains in different cultural-historical situations. And since it is the human agent to make the decision of linking, such variety of necessities and advantages will result in a wide variety of technical systems through the human agency.

propounded.⁵⁵ The crucial difference is that even with its universalistic presence in other cultural domains, the technological domain maintains its particularity as a separate domain, rather than fusing with all of them to form a super domain of technique. However, to argue for a technical universalism, while one can only assert a minimal common essence of technique, would result only in a hollow tautology. For all cultural domains would certainly have their technical aspect, so that we can tautologically say that technique is universally present, both geographically and domainally. Yet these geographical and domainal universalisms do not at all indicate the detailed specificity of techniques in different places and cultural domains.

However, to argue for a reductionistic technical universalism, to assert that technique invades a civilization so that the civilization becomes exclusively technique (see our Section 4.3.2.7) is problematic. For technique is only a restricted one-layered reality. To visualize it conquering all layers of reality and all dimensions of existence in a civilization is a blatant reductionism. This reductionism neglects the hierarchy of multilayered realities or multi-dimensional existence in a civilization.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Due to the translation problem we have discussed, many English readers may have taken Ellul's characterization of technical universalism as technological universalism and accept it.

⁵⁶ For instance, the only system that have come close to a technical totalitarianism was the communist system. Some of Ellul's description here readily calls to mind communist strategy, *"He(man) must be made to yield his heart and will...And so the techniques of propaganda, education, and psychic manipulation came to reinforce the others...Without them, technique could not have been completely certain of its operations."* (p.115). But behind a seemingly technical necessity is in fact a heavy political necessity, as it is the communist system that needs to make man *"yield his heart and will"* (p.115) through a host of technical manipulations of man. Even if some Leftist thinker would like to point out that capitalist system also requires man to yield his heart and will, this political necessity is still there. Thus Ellul's push for a technical totalitarianism has a regrettable effect of cloaking a political totalitarianism that also has its technical aspect, and is therefore superfluously conjured as a 'technical' totalitarianism (cf. p.125).

Every characterization of a civilization has its drawbacks as well as its strength. Every characterization reveals an aspect or dimension of reality that has hitherto been concealed or neglected. We must be aware not only of the significance, but also of the limitation of each characterization, lest we oversimplify the multilayered reality of a civilization and reduce it into a one-layered monism. To characterize a civilization as technical because technique has loomed large is different from arguing that there is nothing to this civilization but technique, that technique determines everything. Although we point to the ubiquity of technique in it, this does not mean that we cannot also describe it as, say, rational, bureaucratic, political, economic, religious, etc. We must, at the same time, allow for the legitimacy of other characterizations as well, which can be used with equal extensiveness at their proper level, unless technique's exclusiveness can be firmly established. If not, then an exclusive characterization of a civilization as technical will become a tautological technical universalism that is empty in meaning. To keep calling everything technique amounts to an undesirable collapse of cultural categories.⁵⁷

4.3.5.4) *Criticism of Technical Autonomy and the Central Values of Technique*

Thus Ellul's notion of technical identity and unity, technical totalization, and technical universalism are all trying to expound what he has hinted at in his definition of technique. All these notions lead to his notion of technical autonomy, which is equally contentious, even if we limited it to the domain of technology. The crucial problem is that his encompassing definition and characterology of 'la

⁵⁷ For example, in the example of art and literature, after pointing to their modern "subordination to a censorship of money or of the state" (p.128), Ellul nevertheless goes on to say that "modern art and literature manifest in all points their subordination to the technique which has extended its power over all activity, and hence over all culture." (p.128) Such collapse of categories (economics and politics taken simply as technique and nothing else) can only happen with his unrestrained use of the term, with his act of calling all domains technique without being sensitive to the non-technical reality within each of them.

technique' have glossed over the real difference of separate cultural domains. But without considering the real difference of separate cultural domains, one would not consider sufficiently their mutual influences and determinations, thus accentuating the notion of technical autonomy.

To counter this notion of technical autonomy, one must consider the hierarchial relationships among cultural domains, which constitutes the ontological structure or order of a culture. In our observation, those cultural domains that deal with a higher level of existence can have an overriding power on the lower or more basic domains. Thus politics and economics, as borne out by the collapse of communism, always have an overriding effect on the development of technology, although this overriding action may be a violent one.⁵⁸

Reciprocally, the lower order domains also have a kind of limiting power on the higher order ones, so much so that if the 'lower' domains stop functioning or are obliterated then the 'higher' domains will eventually be obliterated and the civilization collapses. This hierarchial relationship is in fact borne out by Ellul himself, when he says that *"technique cannot assert its autonomy in respect to physical or biological laws. Instead, it puts them to work; it seeks to dominate them."* (p.134). The smooth functioning of lower domains (in this case physical and biological domains) is essential for the well-being of higher ones. Their best and worst performances do pose limits to the achievement of higher domains. In its relationship with physical and biological laws technique is the 'higher' domain, while in its relationship with economics, it is in turn the 'lower' one. In these considerations it is better to speak of mutual determinations between higher and lower domains.

⁵⁸ Ellul's error or misjudgment with respect to technical autonomy owes very much to communist 'propaganda' conveying a sense of optimistic historical determinism. Such misjudgment lingers onto *The Technological System*, in his mention of Soviet boasting on the future of space research. See Ellul, *The Technological System*, p.126. See also footnote no. 52.

It is in this hierarchial relationship that we consider the autonomy of cultural domains. Although higher domains may be obliterated or limited by lower ones, yet this does not mean that their operations are subjected to the heteronomy of the lower ones, to their norms and values. In other words, obliteration or limitation is not equal to subjection. On the contrary, higher domains do impose their norms and values on the lower ones, although this imposition may not be conducive to the healthy functioning or development of the lower ones. In this light, the lower domains need to have autonomy from the higher ones. Such autonomy cannot be attained by the lower domains themselves but need to be allowed, if not positively prescribed, by the higher ones. It is only in this relative autonomy, that the lower domains' *"own internal necessities are determinative"*(p.133). In the light of these hierarchial relationships, it is inconceivable that technique or technology as a lower domain tackling a more basic aspect of human existence in civilization, can be completely *"autonomous with respect to economics and politics"*(p.133) and in turn be the prime mover of these domains. We can only say that technique or technology has its own internal necessities and laws which must be respected at its own level or domain and not to be overridden by some higher necessities and laws.

These hierarchial relationships also put into perspective the problem of the central values and norms of technique and technology. Although it is the inherent requirement of all means of action to be effective⁵⁹ and efficient, yet when one examines existing techniques or technologies one does not always find efficiency as their central value.⁶⁰ One just has to remember the subtle varieties of values

⁵⁹ Ellul seems to have forgotten that effectiveness is primarily the first logical requirement of all means. It is only after a certain means is effective that we further quest for efficiency.

⁶⁰ In fact Ellul understands that the value of efficiency is central in the quest for power. This probably lies behind his accentuation of efficiency as the exclusive value in technique. See his "Lust for Power", pp. 30-33, especially p.31, "Thus increase of power comes about in our society by the union of the *means* of exercising force with the spirit of power. Bit by bit, absolute efficiency is achieved in an objective and impersonal way, without passion, without feeling", and

(aesthetic, religious, moral values, etc.) the practices of traditional techniques have to realize. Here one must be sensitive to the specific value source that informs the practice or formation of a certain technique.

In fact, each specific means of action would also be determined by the specific value requirements of each specific cultural domain which has put it to use. Thus although statistical techniques are being used both by science, economic management and marketing, yet there are subtle differences in value emphasis to which statistical techniques must subscribe. Even for the domain of technology, its values are closely related to that of scientific experimentation as it took its rise from the domain of science. Efficiency is only one such value among many and not "*the fixed end of technique*" (p.21), although it is important in economizing time, space, matter, and energy. Certainly a large number of techniques and technologies are preoccupied with efficiency - efficient cutting, molding, energy utilization, and the like, which optimize input in relation to output. However, besides efficiency, there are a host of other values in the domains of science and technology. There are the values of accuracy (precision machine, optical instruments), of purity (construction materials, chemicals), of effectiveness (drugs), of versatility, of reliability, of manipulability, of security, etc.

Although the technical value of efficiency has spread far and wide, very often it is the values of higher domains that have become the central values of a certain technique or technology, and determine the direction its development.⁶¹

p. 33, "Any counter to power necessarily aims at reducing efficiency..."; and his "The Ethics of Nonpower", pp. 204-212, especially p.209, "In every one of these cases, it is efficiency that has had to be proved, thereby cultivating power in the technical system and devaluating all morals".

⁶¹ See p.18, Lasswell's definition of technique as "*the ensemble of practices by which one uses available resources in order to achieve certain valued ends*", which Ellul claims he is in substantial agreement. Lasswell gave a list of valued ends which other cultural domains have utilized techniques to serve. Ellul's criticism of Lasswell's term as "*not apt*" (p.18) in fact betrays

Surely, as technology is increasingly wedged to economics, the value of efficiency has attained additional significance, in economizing capital, labour and resources. And for the past thirty years liberal economies, in contrast to centralized economies, have directed technologies to serve consumer demands and values which the consumers treasure. Technological developments are thus under the sway of economic values and consumer values which may in turn be culturally ^{in history} ~~historically~~ conditioned. Technological success has also become dependent on marketing success. The most efficient technology does not always win. Sometimes, the value of efficiency is completely irrelevant.⁶² Obviously technique and technology cannot be "*organized as a closed world*" (p.93), unless one is ready to brand the techno-economic system as 'technique'.

Thus we see that Ellul's notion of technical autonomy cannot stand. It is as hollow as his preceding notions and terminology. The nature of techniques as means of action means that they always serve the 'masters' that have put them to

that he has not understood the hierarchial relationships between cultural domains, due to his all-inclusive understanding of technique. Surely, Lasswell's list of valued ends "*riches, power, well-being, affection*" (p.18) are not 'values' as Ellul has called them, but they would certainly give rise to value which techniques have to serve in order to serve such valued ends of different cultural domains.

⁶² Again, we believe that the problem of Ellul's singling out the value of efficiency lies in the particular cultural-historical epoch in which he spelt out his analysis. The 1950's and 1960's were times when the world as a whole was still very much emphasizing the production side of economy. It was on this side of economy that the value of efficiency was emphasized. But when production reached a certain peak the value of efficiency became irrelevant. With the ascendancy of the consumption side of economy, other values became more important, the most prominent one being the quest for perfection, which as an umbrella term for a host of values was spelt out with reference both to consumer demand and to the highest achievement of a technology at that time. In fact, Ellul's analysis has already betrayed perfection as a further value of technology. See p.16, "*perfection of our war machines...more perfect...more precise*", p.66, "*comfort...manifests itself in the perfection of personal goods and machines*". In connection with perfection, see also pp.72-74 on Ellul's discussion of the withering of aesthetic embellishment due to "*an exclusively rational technique*" (p.73). In fact the introduction of aesthetic considerations, contrary to what Ellul has analyzed, has not disappeared but intensified in modern market economies. All in all, Ellul has not been sensitive to the value change in the domain of technology from efficiency to perfection, both of which can be seen as quests for the highest good (for "*the one best way*", p.79) at a certain stage of technological development.

use. This characteristic is also inherited by the technological domain, although as a distinct domain it has acquired a certain degree of relative autonomy, in the sense that this domain is devoted to the proliferation and perfection of techniques, and that in serving its 'masters' well it certainly gains certain freedom and autonomy to continue its development. Although it does readily form into a complex system with the economy, yet as to its possibility of establishing a domainal hegemony over the whole civilization, even a totalized technological domain cannot achieve this, although this domain is universally present and exerts its influence on all other domains.⁶³ For other cultural domains will also have their laws and necessities to impose on the whole civilization and on technology. Thus there is not much meaning in saying that technology or technique is subjecting all other domains to its cultural heteronomy at the technical level. To say this does not help towards clarifying the mutual determinations among cultural domains, but runs the risk of a technological or technical reductionism, reducing the causes of phenomena in other cultural domains to those in the technological domain or in the technical aspect of each domain.

4.3.5.5) *Criticism of Automatic Technical Progress beyond Human Agency*

Besides the notion of technical autonomy, Ellul's notion of automatic technical progress is also problematic. In fact, the two notion goes together.

What is unacceptable in Ellul's characterology of technical progress in '*Automatism of Technical Choice*' (pp.79-85) and "*Self-augmentation*" (pp.85-94) (see our Section 4.3.2.4) is not that technical activity has transformed the whole world into a technical milieu. At the technical level this is true. But the point of contention is whether this transformation is, as Ellul has characterized it,

⁶³ Even though technology and economy may form into a techno-economic system (see our footnote no. 48) the two domains still maintain mutual influence and determinations on each other, rather than technique one-sidedly exercising heteronomy on economy.

automatic. Granted man may detect a technical necessity in technical development, so much so that he will sooner or later want to allow technical development to run its full course, yet one cannot presume that it is not man who makes the deliberation, that there will not be factors from other cultural domains to influence such development.

Factors from other domains, especially from politics and economics, do influence technical development, and they do so through the human agent. They not only influence the timing of a technical development, but also its profile, its details, its various aspects. Moreover, since there is not just one abstract technique but many concrete techniques or technologies to choose from, human agency is always decisive in deciding which technologies win out. Thus for the past 10 years space technology and nuclear power and even military technologies have lost out to more profitable civilian technologies. Ellul's way of using 'la technique' as an abstract singular subject has the effect of obliterating such concrete differences⁶⁴ and the role of human agency in bringing them about. Yet unless Ellul has demonstrated beyond doubt the complete irrelevance of human agency in technical choice through careful case studies, he is premature to assume this automatism and from then on speak of technique as if it is a subject that possess a power of self-deliberation. Moreover, even granting the validity of this automatism, it is still doubtful whether it can validate using the term 'technique' as subject in his later analysis.⁶⁵ Such linguistic usage gives an impression that technique is an autonomous power while in fact this is not established.

⁶⁴ Can it be said that man always automatically chooses technique rather than non-technique, that there is always an automatism of technical choice over against non-technical choice? But what advantages are there to speak like this? Do not human civilizations always choose like this? Such 'automatism', anyway, did not turn human civilizations into an exclusively 'technical' civilization in the past.

⁶⁵ For example, in *pp.126-127*, Ellul's description of technique as a subject conquering the whole civilization.

4.3.5.6) *Interim Conclusion - Ellul's Mythological Realism Overwhelming*

His own Methodological Nominalism in the Analysis of Technique

Thus Ellul proceeds in his *Technological Society* to produce a characterology in which 'la technique' progressively develops from man's unconscious capabilities into an autonomous power on its own.⁶⁶ In this characterology, Ellul constantly presupposes a mythological essence to technique, so that this essentialist presupposition constantly gets in the way of his cultural analysis of technique. Although this presupposition is not well supported by concrete realities, he is so confident of it that he falls into intellectual pride, putting his analysis in absolute terms, slighting or accusing opposite opinions, without enough justification or open dialogue, as intellectually incapable or ignorant.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ When one reads Ellul's description of the unlimited growth of power, one is struck by its applicability to his analysis of technique. This raises again the question whether Ellul has reached his characterology of technique independent of his observation of the actual growth of technology. See Ellul, "Lust for Power", p.31, "From the moment any system of power has been set in motion, power is never satisfied with itself. This means that, on the one hand, the power at hand is always considered insufficient to achieve the great objectives envisioned by power. It is always necessary to augment power with the conviction that tomorrow one will finally have the means to realize the original vision...On the other hand, power which has increased in the immediate past cannot restrain its own growth. On the contrary, it necessarily continues in the same direction. In the primary accumulation of power is both the condition and also the necessity of further acquisition of power."

⁶⁷ Since this blunder is not essential to our discussion we shall only tabulate some of them below:

p.95 *"This identity is the primary mark of that thoroughgoing unity...As a corollary, it is impossible to analyze this or that element out of it...The great tendency of all persons who study techniques is to make distinctions...These distinctions are completely invalid and show only that he who makes them has understood nothing of the technical phenomenon."*

p.99, *"there is a tendency to utilize all inventions...To say that it could be otherwise is simply to make an abstraction of man."*

p.111, *"It is an illusion...to hope to be able to suppress the 'bad' side of technique and preserve the 'good'. This belief means that the essence of the technical phenomenon has not been grasped."*

p.140 *"He who maintains that he can escape it(technique) is either a hypocrite or unconscious."*

p.146 *"Those who claim to deduce from man's technical situation in past centuries his situation in this one show that they have grasped nothing of the technical phenomenon. These deductions prove that all their reasoning is without foundation and all their analogies are astigmatic."*

Yet the most serious consequence lies in the annulment of the methodological nominalism which Ellul as a sociologist should bring to his cultural analysis. That is, as a sociologist, Ellul certainly can conduct his analysis without any essential presupposition as to the nature of technique.⁶⁸ This, we believe, would have helped him steer clear from the major blunders we have discussed at length, and led him to the conclusion that 'la technique' cannot be the integrated domain and the autonomous power he imagines it to be. Then the cultural-analytic conclusion should have entered into fruitful dialectics with his theological pre-understanding. However, we see a sad case of Ellul's dialectical method broken down. Rather, he embarks on a monolectic of technique, where there is no dialectic between its theological pre-understanding and its cultural analysis. Nor is there any dialectic within the cultural analysis, between technique and other cultural domains of life. Although Ellul refuses to rise from sociology to philosophy,⁶⁹ in fact he operates with his own theological pre-understanding which dominates his cultural analysis, resulting in a mythological realism of an ethereal power domain of technique that has never existed. It is very sad that, despite his intention to demythologize and desacralize technique,⁷⁰ Ellul's cultural analysis of technique ends up mystifying technique as well as the world influenced by it.

In conclusion, this characterology is a monistic reduction of the complex cultural reality, and the theological preconception of technique as an independent power cannot stand. The reality of power needs to be reformulated, both from a theological and a cultural perspective, so that we may understand the formation

⁶⁸ For example, as we have suggested in Section 4.3.5.2, Ellul should expunge the concept of totality from his definition of technique.

⁶⁹ Carl A. Mitcham, *From Sociology to Philosophy: On the Nature of Criticisms of the Technological Society*, (M.A. Thesis, University of Colorado), p.59.

⁷⁰ Ellul, "The Power of Technique and the Ethics of Non-power", p.247.

of a power complex(*p.101*) in human civilization, and the role each specific cultural element (say, technique) plays in it. Especially the relationship among different cultural domains needs to be reformulated in the perspective of their power relationships. This will go some way towards clarifying the problem of cultural autonomy and heteronomy, and avoid the problem of oversimplification, of one-sided assertion of the absolute autonomy of one cultural domain or element over again the power and autonomy of others.

4.3.6) Material Criticism III - Theological Post-reflection I:

Towards an Ontological Understanding of Technique in the light of the Creation and Fall of Nature and Man

In the previous sections we have shown how Ellul's theological pre-understanding of technique as a spiritual power has affected his cultural-historical analysis. But since we cannot pinpoint the theological foundations of this analysis from his theology of the city, which was explicitly stated as his theological post-reflection on technique (see our Section 4.3.1), we have to examine this cultural analysis of technique in terms of the various dogmatic loci, to allow it to be in dialectic with theology, in order to reveal the theological problems behind this analysis. There are many specific aspects of technique, and many of its relationships with other cultural domains, that must be theologically examined.

4.3.6.1) Technique's Ontological Relationship with Science, Nature and Man in the Loci of God's Creation and Man's Fall

Why does Ellul take technique to be an autonomous spiritual power in itself? What is the theological understanding undergirding this speculation? When we examine Ellul's theological understanding of technique, we find that the answer lies in his having a particularly strong doctrine of the Fall. Such a strong doctrine of the Fall has severely curtailed his dogmatic understanding of creation,

so much so that he cannot positively conceive of the origin of technique to lie with God's creation. In "Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis"⁷¹, he has severely criticized the notion that technique arose from God's creation of man. He bases his criticism on the vantage point of the Fall, and expounds a strong agnosticism of the original creation. He severely criticizes the notion of work as a creation mandate⁷², and consequently the legitimacy of technique as the means of action for work. Thus the origin of technique, similar to that of the city, has been relegated to the epoch of the Fall.

Even if we grant that Ellul is right in refusing to ground techniques in the original creation, it must still be asked what role God's creation, even creation as it is under the Fall, can play in undergirding as well as limiting the development of technique. It does not seem that Ellul has paid attention to this, so much so that his understanding of the relation between technology and science becomes deficient, for he has not taken seriously the role of science in understanding God's creation. Consequently, he has not sufficiently considered the nature of technique in the light of its mother domain science, whose nature has to do with the nature of man and of creation.

At this point we remember that Ellul is not a scientist, but a lawyer by training. It can be suspected that this lack of a science background has concurred with other factors to affect his appreciation of the doctrine of creation. Our opinion is that Ellul's cultural-historical background as a non-scientist has adversely affected his appreciation of the power and wonder of God's creation, as well as the positivity of the cultural domain of science, not only in

⁷¹ Jacques Ellul, "Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis", tr. Greta Lindstrom & Katherine Temple, in Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote (eds.), *Theology and Technology* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 123-137.

⁷² Jacques Ellul, "From the Bible to a History of Non-work", trans. by David Lovekin, *Cross Currents*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 43-48.

understanding God's creation, but in guiding and checking technology. As a non-scientist Ellul may not have harboured very positive theo-cultural evaluation on the domain of science, nor has he paid much attention to the positive and negative limits science would impose on technology.

Without taking seriously the doctrine of creation and the cultural domain of science, there are serious problems in Ellul's understanding of technique. There is a tendency for Ellul to magnify the negativity of technique. In fact, there is a tendency for him to demonize it. And the problems caused by this double deficiencies in scientific and theological understanding of creation have manifested in Ellul's understanding of the relationships between technique and nature, between technique and man. That means the lack of appreciation of science and God's creation has a double effect. On the one hand this has caused an underestimation of the limit posed by nature on technology. Secondly, it has caused an overlooking of the influence man can exercise on technology.

4.3.6.2) Underestimating the Limits Posed by Science and Nature to Technique

Everybody knows that science is crucial for the development of technology. However, not all would have taken a close enough look into the details of this relationship, so much so that they will misunderstand the nature of modern scientific techniques or technologies. Since Ellul is not a scientist by training, he has tended to pass rather general comments on the interrelationship between science and technique. In his analysis of technique, there is a tendency to argue that technique has the priority in its relationship with science (*pp. 7-11*). But in fact the question of priority is much more complicated.⁷³ To begin with, Ellul's analysis has shown that technique has a historical priority over science, that technique was there at the very beginning of civilization, well before any

⁷³ As a science major student in the past here I am speaking from my own background.

science came along(pp.7-8).⁷⁴ And then he goes on to posit the priority of technique over science in terms of the dependence of scientific experimentation on the occasion and instrumentation made available by technical development (pp.8-9). Surely there is a technical priority of technique over science since scientific activities can only be carried out at its own technical level. Moreover, this priority will also translate into a cultural-historical priority.⁷⁵

Yet throughout the analysis Ellul has not mentioned the other crucial priority that science has over technique, namely, the onto-epistemological priority of scientific knowledge over technique.⁷⁶ Although scientific experimentation needs technique and thus spurs the development of techniques, once scientific knowledge of a certain technique becomes available, it will determine the future direction of that technique's development, even though that technique has been around for a long time well before its scientific understanding comes along. Thus there is mutual influence between science and technique, and there is furthermore an inviolable hierarchial relationship between them, which Ellul has not really attended to.⁷⁷

The most important point that he has missed in overlooking this hierarchial relationship is the objectivity of science, which is in fact the objectivity of nature

⁷⁴ Here one must be careful that many ancient scientific explanations are clothed in mythological terms, yet their essence are nevertheless scientific. Since such myths arose so early, it may not be correct that ancient techniques always precedes science.

⁷⁵ Thus *"science has become an instrument of technique"*(p.10) in this cultural-historical sense.

⁷⁶ See, for example, p.134, *"However, technique cannot assert its autonomy in respect to physical or biological laws. Instead, it puts them to work; it seeks to dominate them."* Here Ellul seems to be aware of these onto-epistemological limits, yet he does not go on to analyze them, but falls back on the notion of the sociological enslavement of science by technique. See also p.45.

⁷⁷ Thus it is wrong for Ellul to assert that *"scientific activity has been superseded by technical activity"* (p.9) in view of science's onto-epistemological priority in this hierarchial relationship.

or creation. It is this objectivity which poses onto-epistemological limits⁷⁸ to the possibilities of technologies. With such onto-epistemological limits in view, it would not be easy to argue that technology would become the kind of monster many science fiction writers' mythological imagination would make it out to be. In other words, in creation there are ontological limits on the power and possibilities of science and technologies.⁷⁹

Axiologically, with such limits the negativity of technique is also checked.

Although many futurologists would think that there is no limit to the positive possibilities of science and technology, many science fiction writers would think the exact opposite, fearing that there would be no limit to the demonic possibilities of science and technology. In fact, such a limit like the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle does really limit both the positive and negative possibilities of science and technology in the long run. Without an inner understanding of these limits of nature or creation it is impossible to predict the possibilities and impossibilities of scientific techniques. Certainly, Ellul's imagination of technique

⁷⁸ Ellul has discussed the limit of technique. Yet in the discussion he seems not to be aware that the limit is set by nature and science rather than technique itself, *"Doubtless, technique has its limits. But when it has reached these limits, will anything exist outside them? Its limits are presupposed by its object and its method...We shall be answering this question all through this book."* (p.85, bold type ours) Regrettably he has not been answering this question throughout his book, not to mention that this answer must be related to the nature of creation and man. But later Ellul has somehow touched on this limit without being aware of its implications for technique, in Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986, original French edition 1984), p.147, "Our means are limited by the very fact that we have to do with creation and not just nature or any kind of milieu" (bold type ours).

⁷⁹ We do not go into the details of these onto-epistemological limits posed by nature and the scientific domain. We believe that such limits, when elaborated, will go a long way towards explaining many features of the technical phenomenon and technical progress which Ellul has continued to analyze in his later works. Thus for example, that the physical basis itself is an important ontological limit to all techniques, since this means that all techniques must obey physical laws, and are all prone to physical errors. Physical errors will introduce uncertainty to technical progress. See Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, pp.35ff. The physical basis certainly means that all techniques will have an effect on the environment. And this physical or material basis also implies that technique must somehow obey economic laws, refuting Ellul's view that technique can dominate the economic realm.

as an autonomous power is even more subtle and mystical than what science fiction writers generally visualize. According to his characterology, he imagines technique to be a kind of silent Orwellian 'big brother' encroaching on all things, overseeing and determining man and all his activities. Therefore, without really attending to the onto-epistemological limits of nature, Ellul unduly magnifies the possibility of technique becoming autonomous, thus coming close to demonizing it in the end.⁸⁰

On the other hand, Ellul's underestimation of the positivity of creation has caused him to overlook the positivity of technique which are under the guidance of the positive onto-epistemological ideals of nature. Such positivity is reflected in the numerous functions that techniques can perform. Such functions not only render techniques powerful, they also render them good for various purposes. That is, they bequeath positive values on technologies. The recent proliferation of many intelligent machines for the handicapped is surely an example. Positivity is also manifested in the technological drive towards the value of perfection, which is manifested in technology's attempt to imitate and even surpass nature.⁸¹ In fact, many of the problems which Ellul thinks to have been associated with techniques are in fact associated with their imperfections, e.g. waste⁸². For technology is still by nature a human function in civilization which would suffer

⁸⁰ In Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, tr. Peter Heinegg, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983, original French edition 1980), p.247, he has explicitly avoided branding technology as demonic, "I have done quite a few studies on 'technique', but I've always been careful not to say that it was demonic or diabolical." Yet his way of characterizing technique does come close to demonization. In our opinion, this tendency of near demonization is mandated by his way of conceiving technique as an autonomous spiritual power, and cannot be simply checked by his taking caution of the tendency.

⁸¹ Yet even in surpassing or improving on nature technology is still obeying the onto-epistemological upper limit of creation, for we certainly recognize that this creation is now under the Fall and not in all aspects at its optimal state. We also recognize that nature is a rather vague term so that one can only concretely evaluate in actual cases whether a certain improvement of nature has broken the onto-epistemological limit of creation.

⁸² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, pp.287-301.

from imperfections. Such imperfections and inaccuracies arise from the onto-epistemological limits which nature imposes on man and his scientific and technological endeavours. Yet it is also the nature of science and technology to get as close as possible to the natural limits of accuracy and perfection.

4.3.6.3) Trivializing the Influence of Man on Technique

The ramifications of the relationship between science and technique are in fact double-pronged, for science is a domain in which man studies God's creation with all kinds of ingenious means and methods. Thus besides unravelling and scaling the onto-epistemological limits of nature, science also reveals something very important of man. It reveals that man, released from the shackles of superstition, from the inhibitions of a sacralized nature, is capable of understanding God's creation. And it is precisely in this study of God's creation that man utilizes and develops technique. Therefore, at least in the beginning, scientific activity in its utilization of technique is precisely a manifestation of man's autonomy and freedom. This autonomy is precisely shown in man's ingenuity in manipulating nature so that he is able to extract information and knowledge from it. Therefore, at least in the beginning, the development of technology is the expression of man's domination of nature, so much so that the environmental crisis due to man's use of technology is generally thought to be due to man's spirit of domination. No one attributes this crisis to an abstract agent of technique.

However, Ellul's discussion of technical autonomy has a strange effect which goes against Christian sensibility, namely, that this autonomy, vis-a-vis man's inability to stop it, has a strange effect of trivializing man's role, denying him freedom of choice (p.84), and attributing man's technological misconduct to a technical necessity, thus absolving human responsibility in technological sins.

Technique, and not man, becomes the abstract agent that commits such sins.⁸³ In fact, such undesirable theological and moral implications of his analysis should have caused him to reflect on his own theological pre-understanding of technique, for human autonomy is an essential presupposition to the doctrine of sin. Yet Ellul's analysis has the strange effect of obliterating human autonomy.⁸⁴ Moreover, his discussion of technical necessity has the strange effect of eclipsing other kinds of necessities, say, economic, sociological, political, cultural, or religious necessities.⁸⁵ Also, his way of describing man's responses to such necessities has tended to 'mechanize' these responses, rendering such responses to appear as some kind of mechanical reactions, while in fact they may arise from

⁸³ See, for example, Ellul, "Lust for Power", p.32, "Moreover, when power works on man, the inevitable result is a radical one: man becomes a thing. he is objectified (which is quite a different status than 'alienation'). Power works on man as its just and proper victim. Therefore it can lead him, manipulate him, and transform him; it can strip him of his humanity to make him simply a function, or at best an adjunct of power." Obviously, it is Ellul's understanding of spiritual power (with technique as one of its incarnation) that has led to this absolution of human responsibility.

⁸⁴ See, for example, p.92 *"the individual's role is less and less important in technical evolution. Advance for its own sake becomes proportionately greater and the expression of human autonomy proportionately feebler."* This description is satisfactory, except that it must be recognized that this is true for all collective endeavours, not only technology. But the following prediction is overdone: *"Henceforth, men will be able to act only in virtue of their commonest and lowest nature, and not in virtue of what they possess of superiority and individuality...the nature of the technician."* (p.93) As a collective endeavour this only applies to some men, the technicians, not to the managers and politicians who control the technicians, although Ellul would certainly brand managers and politicians technicians. Nevertheless, although many scientists are fast becoming technicians, the nature of science still demands real scientists to be intelligent individuals.

⁸⁵ See *The Technological Bluff*, p.287, "Technique has to produce all that it can. All possible techniques have also to be applied (unless there are economic obstacles)." Such statements of technical necessity are half-baked. It betrays that the technical necessity is not absolute, and that it is itself subjected to a higher economic necessity. In this vein, we can also say, "Technique has to produce all that it can, technically speaking, but...". In fact, on closer examination, many of Ellul's assertions of technical necessity can be analyzed into higher necessities. See for example, p.105, *"Technique demands the most rapid possible application...Modern man is held by the throat by certain demands ...The quickest possible counter-thrust...is necessary...technique demands the most immediate application because it is so expensive."* Obviously, the factor of cost means that the economic necessity is overriding.

much stronger intentionality of and deliberation by man, by his will to power, as Ellul is used to pinpoint.⁸⁶ As Ellul has confessed in *The Technological System*, "I have tried to show that technique is a realization, hence an achievement, hence an increase, of the spirit of power."⁸⁷ If this spirit of power belongs to man, then the deliberation for technique cannot be completely an automatism induced by its own necessities encapsulated in the technical choice.⁸⁸ This is the first undesirable theological implication of his cultural analysis of technique's autonomy.

4.3.6.4) Abstracting Technique out of the Essence of Man

Associated with the trivialization of man's influence on technique is Ellul's abstraction of technique out of the essence of man. We have already seen this abstraction (Section 4.3.2.3), which is undesirable as well as detrimental to his understanding of the natures of technique⁸⁹ and of man. Or, looking at it the

⁸⁶ See, for example, p.195, "*the improvement of statistics makes it necessary for the state to intervene in economic technique.*" Is the intervention really due to technical necessity, or rather to political and economic necessity, due to the state's need to manage the economy for its own sake and for economy's sake, only now that the appropriate technique is available to address these necessities? So there cannot be mechanized response but highly intentional responses by the men of the state. Besides, one should speak of the state's intervention "in the economic domain" rather than "*in economic technique*", for the former is the proper target of the state's intervention, and economics is certainly not just technique.

⁸⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, p.69.

⁸⁸ As we have elaborated above (Section 4.3.2.4), the necessity encapsulated in a 'technical' choice is not necessarily a technical necessity, and the choice is not wholly a technical choice.

⁸⁹ Ellul has talked of the methodological need to temporarily take out the human factor in analyzing socio-cultural reality, and then allow the reinsertion of man back into the analysis at a later stage. See *The Technological System*, pp.84ff. Our response is that such procedure unnecessarily distorts the analysis. Surely, the economy, the bureaucracy, the technological domain, all these are transhuman realities that transcend individual human beings. Yet their very operation always involves human beings, so much so that the behaviour of human beings within such realities must be taken into consideration at the very time of the analysis. That is why we talk of bureaucratic attitude, of consumer behaviour, of technocratic tendency. To abstract such realities from man and to address them as such run the risk of getting a distorted picture of the

other way round, if Ellul has understood sufficiently the nature of man in the light of the doctrine of creation, then even under the gloomy perspective of the Fall, he must still affirm that the utilization of technique belongs to the created nature of man, only now that this utilization is subjected to sin and fallen necessities. Despite all the negative uses man has made of his techniques, such utilization does serve as a signpost to the capability and worth and, albeit more remotely and even in a negative way, the creation mandate of man. We affirm all these not with a gnostic understanding of the original creation, but in the light of the man Jesus Christ, who in his incarnation has taken up the technical work of a carpenter. This signpost function we believe to be applicable not only to traditional but modern techniques, for even in modern externalized techniques the spirit of man is still heavily invested in them, so much so that in using modern techniques there is an intense interaction between the spirits of the user and the original designer.

However, Ellul does not perceive this investment of the human spirit in technique.⁹⁰ Rather, he holds that technique has acquired an autonomous spirit. Although he recognizes man to harbour the spirit of power, in his theological understanding this spirit does not belong essentially to man, but only incarnates in him when he was developing technique. Therefore it is perfectly possible for

reality, which may not be redressed by the reinsertion of man at a later stage. For the analysis of all cultural domains, we advocate the same attitude, for such would not be cultural domains if no men are involved in its activities.

⁹⁰ Cf. Ellul's understanding of the nature of technique in comparison to that advanced by the personalist A. Dandieu in the journal *l'Ordre Nouveau* before the Second World War: "un processus de rationalisation gouverné par un principe d'économie" which is similar but also a somewhat stronger understanding of the investment of human spirit in technique so as to economize the human effort, and link technique to the personalization and depersonalization of individuals and society. See Jean-Louis Loubet Del Bayle, "Aux Origines de la Pensée de Jacques Ellul? Technique et Société dans la réflexion des mouvements personnalistes des années 30" in Patrick Troude-Chastenot (ed.), *Sur Jacques Ellul: Un Penseur de Notre Temps*, (Bordeaux, France: L'Esprit du Temps, 1994), pp.19-35.

Ellul to visualize this spirit of power incarnating somewhere else⁹¹, say, in the technique that man develops. This may be the underlying theological reason for him to abstract technique out of man, and to name and address it as a subject. Yet to do it this way means that Ellul has not been sensitive to the fact that technique was originally an essential trait of man, that most of the traditional techniques are human-bound.⁹² Here Ellul's understanding of the antecedence of a spiritual power has probably led him to dissociate the power of technique from the spirit of man.

Moreover, Ellul has not addressed the cultural-historical question why technology has become detached from man, nor has he spelt out the theological significance of this detachment. Part of the problem of technology lies in its externalization from man, so much so that technology does acquire a momentum of its own, that man can no longer appropriate it as he has once appropriated traditional techniques.⁹³ Man now has to readjust his relationship with

⁹¹ Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, pp. 243-244, "It's not simply a matter of political structures or organizations...we ought to specify that the devil or Satan is not, of course, a historical character, a figure situated in a given place, a personified will with a certain objective. I'm saying that from the biblical point of view every time an accusation or a break in human ties occurs, something more than a simple sociological or psychological phenomenon is taking place, something inexplicable by and irreducible to sociopsychological factors. There is a spiritual dimension of God's domain, a dimension that goes beyond the human, an unanalyzable power that makes the whole thing so terrifying. This is what we mean by the terms Satan or the devil. In the world that we currently find ourselves on, politics is the incarnation of the biblical Satan."

⁹² See pp.64-77, his analysis of *'Traditional Techniques and Society'*, especially p.69, *"The deficiency of the tool was to be compensated for by the skill of the worker. Professional know-how, the expert eye were what counted: man's talents could make his crude tools yield the maximum efficiency. This was a kind of technique, but it had none of the characteristics of instrumental technique. Everything varied from man to man according to his gifts, whereas technique in the modern sense seeks to eliminate such variability. It is understandable that technique in itself played a very feeble role. Everything was done by men who employed the most rudimentary means."* Here Ellul is driving a wedge between human-bound traditional techniques and the tools, and is identifying *'technique in itself'* (in French, "la technique en elle-même") exclusively with the tools.

⁹³ Yet Ellul has not been sensitive to this process of externalization in his analysis of the transition from traditional to modern techniques. See pp.64-78.

id to recognize that it has a reality of its own. Yet this does not
chnology can be completely free from human control and be
om man. The very imperfections of technologies show that they still
uman cultural activity. At most we can only say that technique and
man enter a mutually interactive phase⁹⁴. Yet even in its externalized reality
technology are not completely autonomous from man, nor from other cultural
domains that man has developed. In fact, Ellul himself has devoted some thought
to analyze technology's characteristic of artificiality, which surely arises from the
action of man on them.⁹⁵ All in all, Ellul has a weak doctrine of man which is
not conducive to unravelling the subtle interactions that still exist between man
and technology today.

4.3.6.5) The Negativity of Technique and the Problems of Evil in a Technical Civilization

In his trivializing the influence of man on technique, and in his attributing
technologies with subjectivity and demonic possibilities, Ellul in effect inflates the
negativity of technique to undreamed of proportions, and poses it as the source
of evil for modern civilization. Surely he wants to hint, if not arrive, at the
conclusion that technique is the real culprit in modern civilization. Yet the
problem of evil in modern civilization is much more complicated. There are many
sources of negativity and evil in a civilization, and one cannot just pinpoint
technique as the sole culprit, if one does not follow Ellul in calling all cultural
domains technique, and reducing all necessities into technical necessities. We

⁹⁴ 'Interactive' is the qualifier for the present stage of man-technology relationship, especially
in man's relationship with the computer. But the power relationship between the two parties is not
necessarily symmetrical. In fact, returning to what we have just remarked, we must recognize that
the real power relationship is ultimately not that between man and a technological tool, but that
between the user and the designer of that tool.

⁹⁵ Jacques Ellul, "Nature, Technique and Artificiality" tr. by Katharine Temple, *Research
in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 3 (1980), pp. 263-283. See also p.79.

have noted that many of the 'technical necessities' are in fact natural or economic necessities manifested in a technical form (see our Section 4.3.6.3). That is to say, the source of negativity and evil does not come solely from the technical level. Our suggestion of understanding the formation of power complex in modern civilization (see our Section 4.3.5.6) is also in the direction of unravelling this source of evil.

In the light of the doctrine of creation and Fall, the negativity of techniques themselves must be traced back both to the negativity of the human agent and the negativity of creation under the Fall. Without an understanding of creation and man under the Fall, the negativity of technique will become an enigma. For creation under the Fall is subjected to futility⁹⁶, so much so that these human creations, techniques, are also subjected to futility. This is amply manifested in its loss of ultimate purpose⁹⁷, and in its being prone to inaccuracies and imperfections. Certainly, as we have pointed out, such imperfections are not without their positive implications (see our Section 4.3.6.2). However, such deficiencies also mean that the effects of techniques will always be ambivalent.⁹⁸

Moreover, like all human endeavours, technique is subjected to a prominent negativity of human activities, namely, unpredictability. Certainly, this is ultimately due to the onto-epistemological limit of nature, which dictates that man cannot possess full knowledge of God's creation, so much so that he

⁹⁶ Ellul has already pinpointed this in *The Theological Foundation of Law*, p.71, and later in his *Reason for Being*, tr. Joyce M. Hanks, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990, original French edition 1987), pp.49ff.

⁹⁷ See Ellul's analysis of 'The absence of finality' in *The Technological System*, pp.256-282.

⁹⁸ Ellul has also analyzed this in Chapter I of Part I of *The Technological Bluff*, pp.35-76.

lacks the power to foresee all possible outcomes of technique.⁹⁹

4.3.6.6) Conclusion to our Theological Post-reflection I

- The Vanity of Imagining Technique as an Autonomous Power

Drawing all our discussions together, Ellul's whole conception of an autonomous technique runs the risk of contradicting all the basic theological axioms. He has not taken notice of the onto-epistemological limits of nature introduced by God into creation, that would circumscribe technology even under the Fall. Nor, in the light of God's creation of man and the stark reality of the Fall, has Ellul been sensitive to the possibility and autonomous power of human sin in its domination of nature and fellow man via the technological domain. Nor, in the light of the ontological futility of creation under the Fall, has he been consistent with his own refusal to ascribe technique as demonic¹⁰⁰ and refrained from describing technique as something with substantial reality and close to demonic characteristics. Ellul's understanding of the antecedence of spiritual power has probably led him to this unnecessary demonization.¹⁰¹

In his well-meaning effort after the Second World War to analyze the problem of western civilization, Ellul has wanted to analyze the destructive force

⁹⁹ Ellul has analyzed this in Chapter II of Part I of *The Technological Bluff*, pp.77-99. See also p.88, "mechanical progress is limited by the nature of the physical world. This last is true. But we are far from knowing the total possibilities of the physical world". In regard to technique's ambivalence and unpredictability, it happens that Ellul has analyzed these negative characteristics rightly in his last major work on technique. However, the situation is not so in his previous work. In our opinion there is a gradual transition from a mythological characterology in the first work to a more empirical and realistic characterology in the last work.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, pp. 234-248, especially pp. 243-244. See also footnote no. 73.

¹⁰¹ Here it does not even need to be mentioned that Ellul's way of invoking technique as an abstract subject also comes from his way of invoking powers as abstract subject with the nature of agency. See Ellul, "Lust for Power", especially pp. 31-32.

of civilization, and has turned on technique, not money, as the culprit. Surely it must be noted that his analysis of technique is close to the reality of power in modern civilization. Yet his way of abstracting it from man and conjuring it up as an autonomous power does not correspond to reality. The consequence is that the reality of power in modern civilization has been mystified rather than analyzed. The proper relationships between man and the various power domains, including technology, have not yet been truly understood.

4.3.7) Material Criticism IV - Theological Post-reflection II: Towards a
Theo-economic Understanding of Western Culture and Western Technology:
Man's Cultural Economy within God's Providential & Redemptive Economy

One of the important points in understanding technique and technology is their historicity. The rise of the domain of technology and its mother domain science precisely shows this, as they both arose at a certain stage of human history in a certain culture. To evaluate these cultural-historical phenomena of technique and technology correctly, one must not only pay attention to their nature in the light of creation and Fall, but to this historicity. In paying attention to this historicity, one immediately notes that these domains of science and technology did not develop with equal rigor in all cultures. It is in one particular culture that they have blossomed. To evaluate them correctly, one must be acquainted with the motivating force behind their blossoming in this particular culture, namely, western culture.

Sadly speaking, although Ellul has acted as a historian in recounting the growth of technique, his account is found wanting in its treatment of the motive force behind the rise of science in western culture. This is especially shown in his treatment of the period of the 16th Century (*pp.38-42*). Our point of contention

is not whether he has espoused the standard Christian view on this development¹⁰², but whether he has even taken this development of science into consideration, and inquired diligently into its historical causes, especially when religious motivations were so dominant at this stage of western culture. Without taking notice of this cultural-historical development of science, the cultural-historical analysis of technology will become incomplete and even biased.

However, Ellul's deficiency in this respect does not stop at the domain of science. Neither does he anchor the development of technology in the cultural-historical development of science, nor does he analyze its later development vis-a-vis its relationship with other domains, especially economics, politics and law.¹⁰³ Although Ellul has devoted a substantial section of his first work to the relationships between technique and economics(pp.149-228), technique and politics(pp.229-318), and technique and law(pp.219-300), these sections boil down to reiterating the dominance of technique in such domains. That means the cultural-historical relationships between technology and these domains have not been realistically analyzed. Again this is certainly due to his branding everything technique, without really looking into the particularity of each cultural domain, its particular concern and inner logic. Thus in actuality the domains of economics and politics are not analyzed as such, but only viewed as an extension of the domain of technique in these areas. Without attending to this particularity, it is nearly impossible to pay true respect to each domain's unique cultural-historical development, and to posit an intelligible relationship between each of them and the domain of technology.

¹⁰² R. Hooykaas, *Religion & the Rise of Modern Science*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1972).

¹⁰³ See his accounting of the development of technology from the Industrial Revolution onwards, pp.42-64.

Thus what Ellul analyzes amounts to saying that all these domains have been technicized. Obviously, the reverse effects, namely, how the domain of technology has been politicized, economically modified, and legalized, have not really been attended to. Moreover, how the domains of science and technology have been integrated with these other cultural domains to produce the formidable modern western civilization has not been investigated. That is to say, Ellul has not really enabled the development of technology to be understood in the total cultural economy of modern western culture.

Even with the most superficial understanding, everybody knows that modern western culture is distinctive not only in its technical aspect, but also in its emphasis on several cardinal values in different cultural domains. Thus in economics, freedom, which translates into free market economy; in politics, democracy, and in law, human rights and the rule of law. Just paying the slightest attention to this total cultural economy of modern western culture would cause the analysis of technique to appear very differently. For one must ask how the western development of such values came about, and how such values in their respective domains would form into a cultural order and influence the development of western technology. Such cultural order would pose a cultural or domainal limit to the possibility and reality of technology in western culture.

However, in Ellul's monistic reduction, the cultural order is again characterized as a technical order.¹⁰⁴ This characterization certainly heightens the omnipresence of the technical characteristic in western civilization, but at the

¹⁰⁴ Jacques Ellul, "The Technological Order", tr. John Wilkinson, in Carl Mitcham & Robert Mackey (eds.), *Philosophy and Technology: Readings in the Philosophical Problems of Technology* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), pp. 35-47. The translator translated the technical order into the technological order.

expense of other equally important characteristics.¹⁰⁵ Again, this branding of everything as technique serves to conceal the true cultural or domainal limits other domains would impose on technological development. In fact, at the time when Ellul was going about his analysis, there were two great politico-economic orders, communism and liberal democracy, which tried to compete with each other in terms of technology. In fact, technology could not be completely autonomous under either order. If technology does become something sinister in either or both orders, then it must be recognized that these orders are conducive to such sinister development, and the whole cultural orders must then be put in question. But Ellul's analysis has chosen not to pay attention to the paramount cultural-historical fact of their dominance. On the contrary, his analysis wants to prove the contrary, that technique is autonomous in its development, and will in the end obliterate the difference between these two orders, and subject both of them to technique's hegemony.

4.3.7.1) Towards a Theo-economic Understanding of Western Technology and Western Culture

To touch on the problem of these politico-economic orders, one would inevitably touch on the problem of the spiritual character of western culture. This inevitably leads to a theological diagnosis of the character and development of western culture, its internal contradictions, its various domains, and finally, its contradictory cultural orders. Such diagnosis is important in our theological evaluation of its technology. This means that a theological evaluation of technology must take into consideration the total cultural economy of western culture. Thus a cultural-historical analysis of a cultural domain leads to a cultural-historical analysis of the whole cultural order, which is indicative of the total

¹⁰⁵ Here Ellul seems to have lost faith in establishing cultural order as a christological order with the aid of the cultural domain of law. See Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, pp.105-109. See also our Section 2.4.7.

cultural economy. And in analyzing it one eventually embarks on a theological analysis of the spirit of the culture.

Moreover, in a theological analysis, one should not be concerned solely with the human spirit manifested in the cultural economy. An even more serious concern would be the providential and redemptive activity of God in this human cultural economy. For in our theological understanding the cultural economy of man does not lie outside the divine economy of God. This is not only true for human cultures within the biblical horizon, but for western culture which has been under the influence of Christianity for two thousand years.

Furthermore, we recognize that God's economic activity in the world is in Jesus Christ who has come to the world. His incarnation has serious implications for man's history, especially for man's cultural history after him. This means that when we come to meditate on the cultural-historical development of the West or on one of its domain, we must be sensitive to the possibility and reality of divine activities or interventions in it. The reality of such divine activities are not only important for the development of that cultural domain, but for all other domains and western culture as a whole. If Ellul has overlooked the cardinal values of the various cultural domains, then he certainly will not have perceived that technology's development has been included within the divine economy via this total cultural economy of the West.

The question to ask is: Even if Ellul's worry of technique becoming autonomous is justified, what providential and redemptive actions has God taken in regard to this possibility? If, according to Ellul's prediction, technology is fast becoming something sinister, then we must ask whether God has not instituted some check and balance into the domain, or among the domains, in order to check its development. Would it be just coincidence that science and technology first blossomed in the West? The development of economic liberalism, political

democracy, human rights and the rule of law, why did all these arise together with the advance of science and technology? Without these concomitant developments, what would happen to the development of science and technology, and to western civilization as a whole? As Asians ourselves, we witness the Asian onrush to technology, without concomitant development in political democracy and human rights. This has prompted us to ask: did not all these developments arise from the particularity of western culture which has been put under the tutorship of the Christian gospel? Ellul has later remarked, "All the works and creations, all the political, intellectual, economic, and technical advances of the West have been the result of this tension and conflict" between the gospel and the self-love inherited from Greco-Roman civilization.¹⁰⁶ However, he does not seem to have integrated this theological understanding of the course of western history into his analysis of technique.

We do not press that Ellul must come up with positive Christian answers to these remarkable cultural-historical developments, but we do ask seriously why Ellul has not given thought to any of these questions in his cultural-historical analysis of technique, nor in its theological post-reflection on technique in his theology of the city. If Ellul has expounded how God's grace of election has elected the city of human rebellion to be His city of redemption, then we must ask why Ellul has not founded the cultural-historical development of technology in the same electing grace of God in Jesus Christ? Why has he not anchored the domain of technology in the creation-covenant-parousia time axis, just as he has thus anchored the domain of law? Why has he not situated technique in the eschatological horizon, just as he has thus situated the city? These are truly theological foundations that Ellul can bring to bear on his cultural-historical analysis of technique. All in all, Ellul has not bracketed or grounded technique in a theological foundation of God's action in Jesus Christ between his incarnation

¹⁰⁶ Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, p.77.

and parousia. This leads to an overlooking of the possible economic activity of God in the present world. This overlooking is regrettable when we know that Ellul has in fact analyzed the spiritual character of western culture elsewhere.¹⁰⁷

Besides, to the extent that western civilization consists of a wide variety of ethnic peoples, there have always been more refined differences among different peoples within it. With these ethnic and therefore cultural differences, each western sub-civilization or culture would harbour its own particularity, so much so that there arises a real possibility that different people will treat the same cultural domain differently. With this difference there arises a real possibility of God's economic action of preservation or redemption coming through some of these peoples.

Now, more than fifty years after the Second World War, one remembers the dramatic development of the atomic bomb by the Allied powers, and the mysterious failure of the German effort in this matter. One also stands in wonder of the relatively long period (50 years!) of relative peace after the War, amid massive quantities of destructive weapons. One marvels at the collapse of communism, amid its intimidating buildup of military technologies and its dismal failure in civilian technologies. One must ask seriously whether this was purely the outcome of some kind of coincidence or luck, or some kind of inevitable technical necessity according to the understanding of Ellul, or some kind of providential and redemptive intervention. From a theological perspective, it is meaningful to pose such questions, for the whole course of western civilization and western technology needs to be theologically assessed from the locus of redemption, in which man's total cultural-historical endeavour can be viewed within God's gracious redemptive activity in the world.

4.3.8) Overall Conclusion - The Sterility of a Theological Understanding

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, pp.68-81. We shall deal with Ellul's analysis there in our next chapter.

of Power for Understanding Cultural Domains within God's Economy in the World

After this extended discussion, we come to the conclusion that Ellul's theo-cultural analysis¹⁰⁸ of technique is basically unsound. His theological pre-understanding has prompted him to maintain an extreme thesis that the domain of 'la technique' is the determining factor in modern society and culture. Should he be willing to settle for more realistic theses, say, that the technological domain has grown enormously and has become influential in all cultural domains, and that the technical mentality it instills has affected all domains, then his analysis ~~will~~^{would} become much more intelligible.

But now, because of the extreme thesis, his analysis degenerates into a monistic reductionism. His view of the impending or almost realized autonomy of technique, which translates into a technical totalitarianism in the framework of civilization, has caused his diagnosis of the problems of modern civilization to become biased, overlooking its serious problems in other important cultural domains. This has also affected his theological understanding of modern western world as we shall see in the next chapter.

And Ellul's pre-understanding of spiritual power is particularly sterile. Neither is it able to produce meaningful terminology and characterology of the domain of technology, nor is it conducive to understanding the interrelations among cultural domains and the whole culture within God's economy in the world. It has in effect prevented theological insights from the loci of creation and redemption to illuminate technique's nature and its course in history. Although Ellul has subjected technique to a few theological post-reflections, this single-

¹⁰⁸ We can characterize the cultural analysis of technique as such after we have unravelled the theological pre-understanding informing this analysis.

minded visualization of it as an autonomous power means that he has not properly grounded these reflections in the theological foundation of God's action in Jesus Christ, between his incarnation and his parousia.

er 5) Theology in Dialectic with Cultural-historical

Analysis II - Ellul's Critical Theological

Interpretations of Western Culture

5.1) Introduction

In our last chapter we have remarked that the weakness in Ellul's theo-cultural analysis of technique is also correlated with the weakness in his theological assessment of western culture from which modern technique or technology has arisen. In short, when the divine economy affects a particular culture, which in turn affects a particular cultural domain's development within it, the divine economy provides us with a vantage point to assess such culture and its domains. In this perspective there is a need to embark on a critical theological interpretation of the spirit of a particular culture. This theological interpretation is correlated with a critical theo-cultural analysis of its particular domains, and both the interpretation and the theo-cultural analysis can mutually illuminate each other. In fact, this critical theological interpretation of the spirit of a particular culture from the vantage point of the divine economy would constitute an application of a definitive theology of culture beyond its biblical confines. As Ellul has spelt out such critical theological interpretations of western culture, we shall proceed to analysis them now.

However, in our analysis, we would be concerned not only with the human spirit manifested in this particular cultural economy of the West, but also with the providential and redemptive activities of God in it, for it is in such providential and redemptive economic activities of God that the human spirit in the cultural economy of the West is affected or even transformed. This is based on the conviction that the cultural economy of man does not lie outside the divine economy of God. To really understand how God's economy works out in history,

and how the cultural-historical development of a particular cultural domain is affected by it, we must come to understand how the spirit of the particular culture, in which the particular cultural domain developed, has been affected by the divine economy.

Surely, it is expedient for western theologians to embark on an analysis of their own culture. As for us non-westerners, western culture is a puzzle to be solved, for we feel strongly the same as Ellul that this culture poses the best and the worst possibilities of existence for humankind.¹ Surely, each culture has its own particularity, so much so that it is very difficult for an outsider to completely grasp the spirit of that culture. On the other hand, sensitive insiders would feel the full forces or spirits of their own culture, so much so that they would feel a heightened need to criticize or vindicate it for themselves. Therefore, as outsiders, we shall limit ourselves to posing pertinent questions to highlight Ellul's analysis and his problems. We shall in effect embark on our own critical theological analysis of Ellul's theological interpretations.

5.2) The Theological Mystery of the West

5.2.1) Ellul's Cultural-historical Concern and Theo-cultural Motive behind His Critical Theological Interpretation of Western History

In 1975 Ellul published *The Betrayal of the West*.² The significance of this work lies in its containing an important critical theological interpretation of the history of western civilization. We must point out at this juncture that the

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, tr. Matthew J. O'Connell, (New York: Seabury, 1978, original French edition, 1975), p.vii, "The West represents values for which there is no substitute. The end of the West today would mean the end of any possible civilization."

² Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*. All quotations and their page numbers *in italics* in the present Section 5.2 refer to this book.

theological realism of Ellul implies that he takes history very seriously, not as a theological category independent of revelation in itself, but as the theatre where God's revelation is acted out. This means that Ellul would not try to interpret revelation from a historical understanding independently worked out apart from revelation, but revelation would be the key to interpret the course of history. This is especially true for the history of a civilization which has been wedded to Christianity, namely, western civilization. This also means that as God's economic revelation happens in history and affects history it would be quite impossible for Ellul to interpret theologically modern western civilization without first tackling the theological interpretation of its past history.

The book in itself is remarkable because, for the negative impression Ellul's previous works have conveyed, that he is against western culture, that he is critical of western civilization in terms of its technology and politics, it shows his readers that he can have a more positive assessment of the cultural values of post-Enlightenment western civilization. Here we must point out that for Ellul the designation of '*the West*' is implicitly understood by most people who use it, though Ellul recognized that it would not be possible to give "*a precise and satisfying definition*" (p.viii).

*In any case, 'West' is a word different from all others, and there is no substitute for it. It evokes images and stirs emotions, and these are not false because they are the emotion-laden image of the West! The West is a past, a difference, a shared history, and a shared human project, and it is our very life...being a Frenchman is not the same as being Chinese. Having a long Christian past is not the same as having a Muslim past.*³

Judged from such words in the prologue and the book as a whole, we can safely conclude that by '*the West*' Ellul means western civilization as a whole,

³ See p.ix, the underlining represents the original italicized emphasis of Ellul.

understood through its historical continuities and shared values in spite of its more diverse regional variations. And it is these shared values that Ellul wants to defend as the true inheritance of the West.

5.2.2) Analytical Exposition of the Theological Mystery of Western History

The shared values which Ellul defends as central for post-Enlightenment western culture are reason (and self-control), the individual and freedom (pp.147-192). To their defence he embarks in *Chapter I 'The Defense of the West'* (pp.1-81) on an anthropological and historical elucidation of the birth of post-Enlightenment western man. If Ellul stop~~p~~^{ped} here and ^{went} goes on to criticize the betrayal of these values, the whole work would just boil down to a cultural-historical critique purely philosophical in character. We can cull no more than a philosophy of culture, indeed a philosophical anthropology from this work, without any theological underpinnings. Yet Ellul proceeds to a particular section '*Mystery of the West*' (pp.68-81). In it we find a critical theological interpretation of the course of western civilization after Christ.

In the beginning of the section Ellul first points out that western civilization was not born from a smooth union or fusion between Christianity, Greek thought and Roman order without a severe contradiction between them. By Christianity Ellul means not "*a religious system or a semiphilosophical system of thought or as a moral code, but as the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.*" (p.68) Here Ellul continues with his effort to understand Christianity apart from the category of religion but in terms of revelation.⁴ Thus Ellul located the mystery of the West in terms of the development of Christianity and the broadcast of revelation in it (p.69). For Ellul understands the essence of western civilization

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, tr. C. Edward Hopkin, (New York, Seabury, 1975, original French edition, 1973).

in itself as *"the opposite of what God teaches and bids us live in Christ"* (p.69). Thus *"the mystery of the West is that, for twenty centuries now, it has felt the pull of two strictly contradictory factors which, for all its efforts and betrayals and compromises, it has never been able to bring into unity, balance, and order."* (p.69)

Ellul goes on to describe western civilization before Christ (pp.69-71). Surely this is not a 'pure' description of historical facts, but an interpretation of this pre-Christian history, and a very theological one at that. Here Ellul follows largely Nygren's analysis of the contradiction between Agape and Eros. For him, the essential point of this pre-Christian history is *"that Greece and Rome were part of the same movement, that each in its own sphere obeyed the same inspiration. The driving force was Eros."* (p.71) Under this drive of Eros the human attitude embodied by Roman and Greek civilization consisted of the will to power. Thus Ellul has also adopted Nietzsche's philosophical understanding of western culture to supplement the scheme of Nygren. *"Athens sought intellectual domination...Rome sought political domination...Here is where the greatness and the hidden thrust of Athens and Rome is to be found."* (p.71) And in the end the Greco-Roman civilization served the telos of Eros: *"The world of Greece and Rome was indeed a world in which everything was reduced to man and everything was made to contribute to the glorification of man."* (p.72)

However, the history of the West after Christ began in terms of the interaction between gospel and culture, as the gospel was carried into this West. For Ellul this gospel *"was in utter, open, irreducible contradiction to it"* (p.72). In his description this gospel movement is *"the myth of Babel now turned into history"* (p.72), for *"in the intellectual and political spheres...that was exclusively and completely human"* (p.72), a contradiction from God was introduced into them. For Ellul, this contradiction from the gospel was Agape, the direct opposite

of Eros (p.72). Here Ellul poses his historical viewpoint that there is no natural pattern to be seen in the movement of Christianity into the empire (p.75). And he shuns from speaking of the action of 'providence' in the spread of the gospel, *"for God is not a providence. His actions in history, moreover, are rare and hidden"* (p.74). And the usual explanation based on divine providence does not *"take into account the very great extent to which Greco-Roman civilization, which at every point was diametrically opposed to the gospel, was an obstacle to its spread."* (p.74) All these historical observations he poses to support his claim that the spread of the gospel owed its cause to a deliberate action by God to introduce contradiction into western civilization.

For Ellul, this introduction of the Agapic contradiction to the Eros-driven western civilization has permanently deformed it. The West was *"now confronted with two utterly contradictory and irreconcilable powers and the history of the West is the history of their opposition"* (pp.72-73), which means that God *"has intervened once again precisely at the point where man reaches the pinnacle of his power and autonomy"* (p.73). *"Christianity has been the sickness of the West"* (p.72). But this Nietzschean theme has been turned around by Ellul, *"the course of history would have been radically altered if the western will to power had been given free rein, unhindered by a bad conscience"* (p.73).

Ellul thinks that *"God was determined to enter into...the very centre of man's power, the place where his ambition and pride and will to power were most fully embodied and most clearly manifested"* (p.75). Therefore, *"the greatness of the West, then, consists in this, that it is the place where God has issued his final and most radical challenge to man, because it is the place where man has attained his own greatest stature"* (p.76). *"All the works and creations, all the political, intellectual, economic, and technical advances of the West have been the result of this tension and conflict"* (p.77).

Concerning the modern West, Ellul's analysis is that the West has *"in our reached the climax of all the tension and conflict and contradiction"* (p.77).

Continuing the analysis of Eros and Agape, he observes that while rejecting God, the post-Enlightenment western man *"has reached a decisive turning point: he has acquired the means to satisfy his Eros and his arrogant pride"* (p.77). What Ellul means here is science, which *"satisfies every test of intellectual vigor while also lending itself to effective application"* (p.77). Here Ellul obviously alludes to technology. Now western man *"can radically change God's work"* (p.78). Here, Ellul comes to a characterization of modern western culture in terms of Christology. He contends that *"it is as if now the crucifixion has at last become fully a historical reality. It is in our day that Jesus is, in the fullest and most radical sense, being rejected by everything...It is in our day that Jesus is being, in the fullest and most radical sense, humiliated"* (p.78). "Eros", in this christological understanding of Ellul, *"has triumphed through technical and political advances."* (p.79)

5.2.3) Analysis of Significance I - Formal Consideration - The Passage as a Critical Theological Interpretation of the History of a Culture

Thus Ellul sees in *'The Mystery of the West'* the course of western cultural history under the contradicting forces of the gospel and the self-love inherited from Greco-Roman civilization. This dialectical tension is for Ellul the mystery of the West. In this critical theological interpretation, the cultural-historical motive of Ellul is very evident, as can be seen from the format of the whole book. It is only in this dialectical understanding of the cultural contradiction inherent in the spirit of the West that Ellul can dissect modern betrayals and contradictions of the true values of the West by the true inheritors of the West, namely, the Left, as a continuation and modern manifestation of this inherent contradiction.

The first and formal significance of this passage by Ellul is that it is, pure and simple, a critical theological interpretation of history, of cultural history. And as an interpretation of history it is subjected to all the problems of historical interpretations. For one, whether it tallies with cultural-historical facts and whether its interpretation represents a valid inference from those facts are serious problems to be considered, not to mention whether this interpretation can be admitted as valid interpretation by historians who harbour a more naturalistic historical outlook. Certainly, even from a naturalistic perspective, no one can refute his interpretation, for strictly speaking even if one does not believe in the same God as he does, even if one does not think that God has deliberately introduced the gospel to the West, one cannot thus invalidate his thesis that the spirit represented by the Christian gospel is diametrically opposite to that of the Greco-Roman civilization, so that tension results throughout western history. To recognize the ethos of Greco-Roman civilization as self-love, and that of the Christian gospel as agape-love is, strictly speaking, still a matter of interpretation on the cultural-historical plane. This is strictly speaking not the theological part of the interpretation. The theological part resides in Ellul's understanding that it is God who deliberately introduced this gospel as a contradiction to man in this particular culture, even to the point of going against the more natural and obvious course of missionary activities towards the East. Obviously, this latter half of the theological interpretation extends itself to the cultural-historical plane, resulting in concrete cultural-historical phenomena for all to see and verify. Therefore, this critical theological interpretation of cultural history is concrete as well as prophetic.

Surely, to locate the truly theological part of this interpretation in terms of Ellul's estimate of God's intention, and to say that this transcendental part is not strictly required by a secular interpretation which may recognize similar contradictions, does not mean that this theological part carries no effect on secular investigation. For one thing, such theological interpretation advanced by Ellul has

the merit of integrating more historical facts into the interpretation, namely, the facts of all the unfavourable circumstances Christianity faced in its initial missionary history in the West. Secondly, such theological interpretation has the merit (to secular historians demerit) of heightening the fact that there is indeed a contradiction between the spirit of the gospel and that of Greco-Roman civilization, by situating this fact in the intention of God. This notion of intentionality due to a transcendental agent is something not admitted by secular historians but significant for a Christian if he has to make sense of a certain course of history. Moreover, only with an understanding of God's intentionality in man's cultural history can a more normative theology of culture be expounded to guide Christian action and participation in a certain cultural-historical epoch.

5.2.4) Analysis of Significance II - Methodological Consideration

- Revelation as the Clue to Culture and History

As we have remarked, the truly theological part of Ellul's interpretation of western cultural history is not strictly required by a secular interpretation which may recognize similar cultural-historical facts. We must therefore inquire more into the source and method of this theological interpretation. For Ellul, the source of this theological interpretation cannot arise from the cultural-historical facts, from the facts of missionary advancement. Such facts only provide the occasion and the 'raw material' for the theological reflection to work on. Methodologically, Ellul would not allow an inductive cultural theology to arise from cultural-historical facts taken as theological source. For him, the source of this theological interpretation lies decisively with revelation. Only in the light of God's economic action in Christ can Ellul detect the intentional introduction of the gospel into the West. That is why his crucial interpretation of the mystery of the West comes from the Scripture rather than from cultural-historical findings. For Ellul, *"the decisive moment occurred in the night when God in a dream ordered Paul to cross the straits into Greece...Upon this vision the specific*

character of western civilization depends; at this moment the mystery peculiar to the West and the contradiction that runs through western history come into being." (p.73)

With revelation as its source, even though Ellul's theological interpretation does not arise by induction from cultural-historical findings, it is not just arbitrary or accidental. It is founded on the divine foundation of the economic intention of God. For it is in God's economic intention that this gospel must spread to all the earth and become a potent force in history. Formally speaking, we can characterize such procedure methodologically as 'deductive'. It would be better to recognize this procedure as an effort to explain cultural history from the economic intention of God, and to characterize it as an economic hermeneutic of cultural history. Since God's economic action in Christ must continue into history it is imperative to explain the historical course of the affected cultures in this light. Thus we can see this critical theological interpretation of cultural history as an extension of an economic theology of culture.

For a theologian of culture to be concrete and substantial in his task, we recognize that he cannot stop at giving vague and general ideas on how God looks at culture. Nor can he just stop at a general biblical understanding of culture. If a theologian of culture is convinced that all cultural history is actually included within the creation-covenant-parousia time axis and cannot be outside God's salvation history, he must go on to produce critical theological interpretations of the histories of actual cultures and their various domains, especially of the one he is living in. This, we recognize, is what Ellul has done in *The Betrayal of the West*.

Certainly, in this passage, Ellul has pinpointed that the gospel must take root in the very seat of human power, in the culture where human development of power would reach its pinnacle, namely, in the West. In his reasoning this is

necessary in order to check the growth of human power in history. This reasoning arises from a theological interpretation of God's economic intention, which has an effect of heightening the cultural particularity of the West from a theo-cultural perspective. It can therefore be seen that there is indeed a dialectical relationship between theological interpretation and cultural-historical analysis.

There is a problem as to the correctness of this theo-cultural diagnosis of the West. It raises two questions. First, does this mean that the West's cultural particularity is a contingent reason or necessity for God to elect the West? Would not Ellul's estimation attach too much importance to the West among all the civilizations of the earth? In view of the inscrutability of God's reason for election can such contingent necessity be posited? In view of God's great power would He not have achieved the same purpose if He had directed the gospel to the East? Such questions do not mean to overturn Ellul's interpretation, but to reveal the highly speculative nature of any theological interpretation of such kind. Surely, we do not mean to dismiss the importance of such theological interpretation, since such interpretation, though speculative, is important for Christians to make sense of history and to formulate Christian action. But the wide range of possibility in speculation does mean that such interpretation must be more solidly grounded in a rigorous understanding of God's economic action and purpose. In our opinion, how such interpretation can represent valid deduction from God's economic action must be worked out from the perspective of a thoroughly incarnational christology. On the other hand, since such interpretation must be applied to interpret concrete cultural-historical facts there must be more rigorous understandings and evaluations of such facts. There cannot be secret attenuations or amplifications of such facts due to one's personal or cultural-historical prejudice for or against certain cultures. In the next major section (Section 5.3) we shall examine Ellul's theological interpretation of modern western civilization which exhibits problems in these two aspects.

5.2.5) Evaluations & Criticisms - Material Problems of this Critical Theological Interpretation of Cultural History

So much for the formal and methodological significance of this short yet important passage of Ellul. Now we shall try to explore further the theo-cultural significance of this passage. In this connection we must delve into its material problems.

5.2.5.1) The Central Problem of Ellul's Understanding of the God-man Dialectic

As is evident from our exposition above, the God-man dialectic is central in this critical theological interpretation of the cultural history of the West. It is within the framework of this dialectic that Ellul analyzes the cultural spirit of the West as self-love, and it is in this dialectic that the intentional introduction of the gospel to the West is understood by Ellul as God's dialectical response to this spirit. With this dialectic as its central paradigm, there is no question that this critical theological interpretation is economic in character. Thus it is in this dialectic that we find the continuity between the passage and the definitive theology of culture of Ellul, so much so that this passage can be seen as a continuation or application of that economic theology of culture in the symbol of the city. That is why we have characterized the passage as an economic hermeneutic of cultural history.

However, when we examine the specific character of this God-man dialectic, the striking thing is that Ellul has characterized it almost exclusively as one of contradiction. It is wholly a description of how God contradicted what western man has arrived at in his culture, and of how western man has once again tried to contradict this economic intervention of God by new and more powerful means of Eros, namely, modern techniques. One is bound to ask, does God really respond to man's contradictions with His own contradictions? Besides

contradiction, what other character can be more appropriately used to describe the God-man dialectic? Here, one must raise the question on the propriety of this characterization.

It must be noted that Ellul has first adopted the idea of dialectic, and that of dialectical contradiction, from Marx. Although in his later conversion to Christianity he has taken effort to understand dialectic in the light of revelation, one must ask whether Ellul's understanding of dialectic as exclusively contradiction owes more to his Marxist pre-understanding than to revelation. Here, we have come to encounter the intricate matter of using human cultural concepts to interpret revelation. Since the concept of dialectic has undergone a long history in the West, taking on new meanings in new discursive contexts, one must be careful not to import unjustifiably such meanings into revelation.⁵ Yet in order to interpret revelation in new cultural-historical contexts, it seems unavoidable to use cultural-historical concepts to characterize revelation. Thus the way forward can only be one of mutual interpretation, with the priority always belonging to revelation. Thus when one tries to interpret revelation with a certain cultural-historical concept, one must first allow revelation to form and reform its original cultural-historical meanings, so that such concept can finally be fit for interpreting revelation. Yet when we examine Ellul's more explicit statement on dialectic, it seems that he has only concentrated on interpreting revelation as dialectical rather than vice versa, thus justifying his continual use of dialectic as a basic characterization of reality.⁶ It can therefore be asked whether his underlying concept of dialectic has been adequately transformed by revelation or not.

⁵ Daniel B. Clendenin, *Theological Method in Jacques Ellul* (Lanham and London: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 31-36.

⁶ Jacques Ellul, "Dialectic", in his *What I Believe* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989, original French edition, 1987), pp.29-46.

Surely, we do not intend to suggest that Ellul's understanding of dialectic is totally unbiblical. In fact, although Ellul has not thus characterized his own dialectic as such, our characterization of his as a God-man dialectic (in accordance with the way he expounds this dialectic throughout his works)⁷ has already pinpointed its largely biblical character, for he has definitely transferred the context of dialectic from an impersonal historical process to a personal encounter between God and man. In this transfer the original Hegelian connotation of dialectic as thesis giving rise automatically to antithesis and synthesis has been largely replaced by a more voluntary and interpersonal connotation of contradiction between two personal parties. Yet it is not this interpersonal connotation, but the very antagonistic character of contradiction that we still want to question.

When we further examine Ellul's God-man dialectic in this passage, we soon find that it has been extended into a dialectical contradiction between the gospel and a particular culture. Examining this secondary dialectic of gospel and culture enables us to see that there are other possibilities to characterize the God-man dialectic. Utilizing H. Richard Niebuhr's typology in his famous *Christ and Culture*, it becomes apparent that Ellul's dialectical contradiction between gospel

⁷ Thus we must criticize most strongly Clendenin's thesis that "the dialectic between freedom and necessity is the central and controlling idea in all of Ellul's work" (ibid., p.59). If there is any controlling paradigm, rather than idea, then this must belong to the God-man dialectic. It is inconceivable that Clendenin has not detected this central paradigm, and that the dialectic between freedom and necessity can at most be a subsidiary of this central paradigm, and that it can only explain part of Ellul's huge corpus. Our expositions of Ellul's theological and cultural-historical expositions of law, of the city, of technique and here of the West, have amply shown that the God-man dialectic is indeed the profound, intense and far-reaching paradigm that controls all these works of Ellul. And the discovery of this central paradigm has certainly helped us to understand other works of Ellul, which cannot be so readily comprehended in terms of Clendenin's paradigm. For example, Ellul's early works *The Judgment of Jonah*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1971, original French edition, 1952), and his famous exegetical work of political theology, namely, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1972, original French edition, 1966), are both conducted primarily in terms of the God-man dialectic, and only secondarily in terms of a dialectic of freedom and necessity.

and culture fits Niebuhr's characterization of the 'Christ against Culture' type. This would immediately call to mind other types of 'dialectical' relationship between 'Christ and Culture', namely, that of accommodation, of synthesis, of paradox, of transformation.⁸

With the existence of these other dialectical types, we can come to understand the problem of Ellul's characterization from two angles. These two angles pertain respectively to the variability and the constancy of the God-man dialectic. Firstly, from the angle of the variability of the God-man dialectic, we ask, "Should the dialectical relationship between God and man always be characterized as contradiction?" Given the variability and change of human culture in history, can it be true that a certain human cultural tradition is always in a state contradicting the gospel? According to Niebuhr's analysis, it is not difficult to see that the gospel's dialectical contradiction of culture belongs more pertinently to the initial period of evangelization.⁹ This pertinency is certainly borne out by Ellul himself, for Ellul in the present passage also concentrates on analyzing God's original intention in this initial period of evangelization. However, Ellul's exposition in the passage has in fact generalized this contradiction to become the fundamental character of the God-man dialectic throughout the whole cultural history of the West. Yet Niebuhr's analysis has precisely shown that, when it comes to other periods of the West, other types of dialectical relationship between gospel and culture did emerge. This certainly has to do with the change or even transformation of western culture under the tutorship of the gospel.

⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

⁹ Ibid., Chapter 2, pp.45-82. Surely Niebuhr also lists other examples of the 'Christ against Culture' type beyond the initial period of evangelization, e.g., Tolstoy's rejection of culture, pp.56-65. Yet this does not invalidate the pertinency of the initial period of evangelization to this type of characterization. In fact, given the radicalness of Tolstoy's position, one can easily understand why he took this position similar to the early church.

Secondly, viewing from the angle of constancy, we see that Ellul has expounded the elements of constancy within human culture, in the form of deep-seated cultural motives that remain constant throughout the history of a culture. It is in response to such deep-seated cultural motive of self-love that Ellul posits God's introduction of the gospel as a permanent dialectical contradiction to the West. Here Ellul is certainly basing his characterization of the God-man dialectic at least partly on such human elements of constancy. But more importantly, besides positing constant fundamental motives within a culture, Ellul would like to posit contradiction as precisely the most important element of constancy in the God-man dialectic. Here we detect that Ellul, because of his strong understanding of the Fall, emphatically posits that man is constantly in a state contradicting God, and that God's dialectical response is precisely one of contradicting such human contradictions. Thus the human action of contradiction is forever a mark of his sin and alienation from God. On the other hand, since God always acts in response to man, it looks as though His response must always follow this logic of contradiction pre-set by man. In this light Ellul's understanding of dialectic as contradiction has in fact limited the possibility of God's action to only one mode, rendering it contingent on man's action and restricted to an infralapsarian mode.

On the point of elements of constancy within human culture we readily agree. Yet we question whether this constancy is decisive in giving rise to a universal characterization of the God-man dialectic, as well as doing away with the need to change this characterization according to the exigent variations of man's state in different cultural-historical epochs. And on his understanding of contradiction as a constant character of the God-man dialectic, we must ask more radically whether this would not mean dictating the character of the God-man dialectic from an anthropological starting point of human sin. We must ask whether the Fall should be allowed to become the dogmatic focus to understand the God-man dialectic. We must ask whether this focus would not render the

character of the God-man dialectic to depart from the spirit of the gospel, from the constancy of God's gracious character and intervention.

It would not be too much to say that Ellul's understanding of the dialectic still owes too much to Marxism, so much so that he has come to love this character of contradiction and has very positive view on it.¹⁰ Yet it is precisely questionable whether the God-man dialectic can be constantly understood as contradiction and still be perceived as basically positive. It must be asked whether this dialectic has not become too antagonistic, ultimately carrying more negative than positive implications. We must also ask whether the constancy of this dialectical contradiction is not ultimately human-based, rather than founded in God and His economic action in Christ. Therefore, we find this characterization objectionable, not so much because the variability of human culture requires different characterization in different epochs, but because the very constancy of God's gracious dealing with human culture requires a more evangelical characterization.¹¹

5.2.5.2) From Gospel and Culture to Christ and Culture

In order to arrive at a more evangelical characterization of the God-man dialectic, we must try to investigate the theological constancy of God in His dealing with man. It becomes obvious that this must lie in the person and work of Jesus Christ, in whom God's decisive dialectic with man has taken place. God's constancy in dealing with man's culture is supremely manifested in Christ's

¹⁰ See Ellul, "Dialectic". There Ellul stands on the positivity of the dialectical process to respond to his critics. We shall have more on the negativity of this dialectical contradiction in the following discussion.

¹¹ In fact, as Ellul himself has shown in his theology of the city, what God has done is not to contradict man's cities and city-building, but to substitute Christ for the city as the true abode and telos of man, and finally to take up our earthly cities and transform them with His Trinitarian presence into our eternal abode. See our Chapter 3.

constancy in dealing with culture. The gospel and culture dialectic must hark back to this more central dialectic between Christ and culture, which in fact constitutes the theological crux of the former dialectic.¹²

At this point one surely calls to mind Niebuhr's work again, which carries this title and has given an impression to deal with this central dialectic. Yet not all types of characterization propounded by Niebuhr are equally adequate in characterizing this constancy of God. In fact, what we have argued at length here is that the 'Christ against culture' type of characterization, to which Ellul's dialectical contradiction belongs, is basically inadequate in describing God's constancy in dealing with our culture, for its constancy is in fact anthropologically conceived. Since the different types of characterization Niebuhr describes basically represent human efforts at characterizing the Christ and culture dialectic in different cultural-historical epochs, our task must consist in sieving out less adequate human characterizations. This mandates us to go back to the original Christ and understand the constant thrust in his dealing with culture, and then use this understanding to adjudicate these different types of human characterization.

For this task Niebuhr's work does not provide us with much help, for he himself has precisely declined to adjudicate the different types of characterizations. We have pointed out in our Chapter 1 that the most glaring deficiency of this otherwise excellent work is that it conspicuously leaves out an investigation on Christ's dialectical relationship with the cultures of his day.¹³ The result is that Niebuhr cannot draw out a paradigmatic dogmatic understanding of the theological constancy behind this actual incarnated life of Christ, to justify

¹² In this vein we appreciate that the title H. Richard Niebuhr chose for his book *Christ and Culture* has clearly singled out the central significance of this dialectic for a theology of culture.

¹³ Instead, Niebuhr is contented with proceeding with a rather formalistic 'definition' of Christ, which in fact avoids tackling important questions of Christology, and of Christ's relation to the culture of his day. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-29.

his own preference for the 'Christ transforms culture' characterization. That is why he has ended up in a Kierkegaardian existentialism which allows one to choose whatever types of human characterization one sees fit in a given cultural-historical epoch.¹⁴ Although this Kierkegaardian existentialism has shown that Niebuhr has taken seriously the variability of human culture and so the variability in characterizing God's dialectic with this culture, it also shows that Niebuhr has not grasped the significance of God's constancy in His dialectic with human culture.

5.2.5.3) Towards an Incarnational Dynamic for the God-man dialectic in Culture

Here, we cannot proceed with a full investigation of the dialectic between Christ and culture. We shall only limit ourselves to indicating the line along which this task should be carried out. For us, the internal dynamic of the God-man dialectic that is going on in the person and work of Christ is the incarnation. In this incarnation the Eternal Son of God becomes the historical Jesus. In it one finds the constancy of God's dialectic towards man. That is why we insist that any investigation of the dialectic between Christ and culture must first proceed with investigating the historical Jesus' relationship with the cultures of his day.¹⁵ Moreover, any human characterization of the God-man dialectic must now be qualified by this incarnational understanding. In fact, it would be wholly appropriate to characterize this Christ and culture dialectic as 'Christ incarnates in culture'. In this incarnational dynamic all other human characterizations of the dialectic receive their relative validity. Niebuhr's preferred 'Christ transforms culture' characterization certainly gains its validity as manifesting the transformative power of the incarnation. Thus this incarnational dynamic in fact

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 230-256.

¹⁵ We have touched on this point in Section 3.6 of our Chapter 3.

addresses Niebuhr's concern and can therefore do away with the need of a Kierkegaardian existentialism to safeguard the variability of human cultural exigencies. God's constancy in his incarnational dealing with human culture is seen to be able to cater for the variability and change of human culture.

It is in the light of this incarnational dynamic that we find Ellul's characterization of contradiction too negative, for it fails to account fully^{for} the intricacy of God's dialectical response to man's disobedience. Yet, because of the inclusive nature of this incarnational dynamic, it does not totally nullify this characterization. Rather, it illuminates and finally includes it, by showing that such contradictions can also be moments in the all-inclusive incarnational dynamic. Still, it is obvious that, despite the effort Ellul has expended in baptizing his original understanding of the dialectic, by anchoring it in a biblical God-man interpersonal matrix, his understanding of the God-man dialectic remains seriously deficient because of the lack of a thoroughly christological and incarnational understanding. We shall further investigate this deficiency in his critical theological interpretations of modern western civilization.

5.2.5.4) The Problem of the Negativity of this Critical Theological Interpretation of the West

The general negativity of this critical theological interpretation of the West arises from its central paradigm, from the character of contradiction of its dialectic, because this central paradigm can only conceive of God in dialectical contradiction with man. Although Ellul is able in this broadly conceived contour of contradiction to interpret the Left's betrayal of Enlightenment values as a kind of self-contradiction derived from western man's contradiction of God, yet this broad contour of contradiction is unable to help us understand in detail the theological underpinning of western values, institutions and cultural domains. The defence of Enlightenment values after this critical theological interpretation of the

West is completely couched in secular terms, and there is not even a trace of theology to suggest how the gospel has affected or given rise to such values, or at least bequeathed to them a character of contradiction. This is easy to understand, for a God-man dialectic without a sufficiently incarnational understanding cannot adequately conceive how God's positive values can incarnate in human ones.¹⁶ A God-man dialectic conceived as essentially contradiction is dualistic in nature, and under such dialectic it is difficult to conceive how human values can be related to God, except in an antagonistic fashion. Thus the Enlightenment values can only be conceived and defended solely as anthropological values.

Therefore, this God-man dialectic in contradiction in fact cannot provide both an interpretative as well as an evaluative theological platform for human culture and for its values, institutions and domains. Without providing such a platform, there is no normative theo-cultural suggestions for human culture either. In point of fact, a dialectic of contradiction does not necessarily need to be this negative. In a dialectic of contradiction, the positive values of God can still stand out, and upon such positive theological values a normative theology of culture can still be spelt out. Yet it is the particular failure of Ellul that this critical theology of culture provides no normative theo-cultural suggestions for the West, for its central values and cultural domains and institutions. This is certainly related to the strongly critical or polemical cultural-historical motive of the work, which aims only to take the Left's betrayal of western values to task, without aiming at establishing a new normative theo-cultural framework for the West. *The Betrayal of the West* remains by and large a cultural-historical treatise without theological underpinning and achieving no theo-cultural purpose.

¹⁶ A more balanced and incisive theological evaluation of the Enlightenment legacy is Colin E. Gunton's *Enlightenment and Alienation--An Essay towards a Trinitarian Theology*, (England: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1985).

5.3) God's Abandonment of the modern West in the Late 1960's and Early 1970's

5.3.1) Introduction

The negativity of Ellul's paradigm of God-man dialectic is manifested most paramountly in his critical theological interpretation of modern West which we are now going to examine. This interpretation appears in his *Hope in Time of Abandonment*.¹⁷ The answer to the religious question of the techno-cultural closedness of modern western world¹⁸ appears in this work of theological ethics, in which the cultural closedness is developed into a socio-cultural analysis of the hopelessness of modern man. Moreover, this socio-cultural analysis is further coupled with a critical theological interpretation of modern western civilization.

In fact, in *The Betrayal of the West* Ellul has also briefly touched on this critical theological interpretation, which is in fact a continuation of the critical theological interpretation of western history. There, applying a christological analogy, Ellul came to an important assertion of the attitude of God toward modern western culture: "God has fallen silent".¹⁹ Immediately he points out that this is not a silence forced upon God because He is pronounced dead, but the Triune God in his sovereignty no longer speaks in response to modern western man's assault on Him with "his sciences and his technical skills".²⁰ However, God "is still being revealed in his present humiliation, and only in this

¹⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, tr. C. Edward Hopkin, (New York: Seabury, 1977, original French edition, 1972). Hereafter in this section (Section 5.3) all the quotations and page numbers shown in italics refer to this book.

¹⁸ See Ellul, *The New Demons*, especially Chapter III, pp.48-87, and Epilogue, pp.203-208.

¹⁹ Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, p.79.

²⁰ Ibid., p.80.

humiliation".²¹

For Ellul, this silence of God is "of capital importance for the history of the West"²², for it "entails the disappearance of the very meaning of western history".²³ The West is dying because it has won out over God²⁴, and here Ellul comes to a further theological statement on the modern world exemplified by western civilization, namely, God's absence as manifested in his silence means "the abandonment of the world".²⁵ For an elaboration of this statement we must go on to examine his *Hope in Time of Abandonment* in detail.

The work was written by Ellul in the late 1960's and early 1970's.²⁶ It must be noted that this was a period of massive cultural-historical upheavals in the West. The year 1968 was marked by America's climatic involvement in Vietnam, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, China's intense involvement in the Cultural Revolution, and widespread student protests in the West, especially in France, Germany and America. And in the immediate years after 1968 such a situation dragged on. Surely, such a situation had instilled in many sensitive people in the West a sense of hopelessness. Its massive upheavals had certainly prompted many intellectuals in the West to embark on cultural-historical reflections on the state of human civilization, and Ellul was no exception to this.

²¹ Ibid., p.80.

²² Ibid., p.81.

²³ Ibid., p.81.

²⁴ Ibid., p.81.

²⁵ Ibid., p.81.

²⁶ Although the original French edition was first published in 1972, it was indicated in it that the manuscript was written between December 1969 to September 1970. See Jacques Ellul, *L'Espérance oubliée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p.286.

Yet what was exceptional for him was that he has come up with a novel theological interpretation of the situation, just as he has come up with a novel interpretation of the true culprit of modern civilization in terms of technique. The novel²⁷ theological interpretation he has reached is that the state of western civilization at that time has shown that God has abandoned the West, and that all the social and cultural-historical signs of time were signs of this abandonment:

*It seemed to me that our society in its sociological evolution, as well as the individual in this society in his psychological outlook, were types of what the Bible says happens when God turns his back and is silent.*²⁸

5.3.2) Analytical Exposition I - Gloomy Socio-cultural Analyses of the Modern West in the 1970's - Western Technical Civilization Coming ^{to} a Dead End and Hopeless as Its Cultural Zeitgeist

Ellul's theological interpretation that modern western technical civilization is abandoned by God consists of two parts. The first is a socio-cultural treatise which tries to convey the deep sense of hopelessness which westerners experience in their modern civilization, and the second is a theological one in which this hopelessness is taken to signify God's abandonment. We shall now examine the first part in which he tries to explore *"the paths by which the end of hope has come...the way in which man lives out his selfhood in this society, and...this end of hope...toward which all the principal traits of our society converge"* (p.69).

Firstly, Ellul tried to detail the symptoms and impressions he gained on the state of modern western civilization in the late 1960's and early 1970's. It

²⁷ Yet the novelty of this theological interpretation must be qualified. Ingmar Bergmann, the famous Swedish film director, has also sensed strongly the absence of God.

²⁸ Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, p.vi.

must be noted at this juncture that the symptoms and impressions are not systematic. Rather, they represent personal impressions of a western Christian intellectual who has been intensively involved in and observing the socio-cultural events. Such symptoms and impressions have been extensively analyzed by Ellul in his previous works, and the present examination can be seen as an overall synthesis of his previous cultural analyses. For Ellul such symptoms and impressions are *"signs which reveal the absence of any way out for the world in which we live, the absence of a prospect for the future"* (p.1).

Thus the first symptoms Ellul advances is that of the closedness of the world, which has been so keenly felt despite the seeming scientific breakthroughs around. In fact, the world was *"more closed the more man multiplied his means of opening it up and dominating it"* (p.5). The technical advances only add up *"to the universal absurdity of life"* (p.5) which he has later analyzed in more detail.²⁹ This characterization of Ellul indeed echoes his diagnosis of the religious impulse of modern man in the technical society.³⁰ And throughout his discussion 'the system' is constantly mentioned,³¹ which certainly points to the technical system. In Ellul's eye this 'technical' system has encroached on the whole modern society.³² With this system in place man *"is fundamentally convinced that a new kind of determinism has been established in society, an inescapable play of forces over which he has no control"* (p.7). With this comes fate, ultimate meaninglessness, and the impossibility of history (p.9).

²⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990, original French edition 1988), pp.199-326.

³⁰ Ellul, *The New Demons*, pp.207-208.

³¹ Besides 'system', similar terms like 'organization', 'structure' also point to the same reality. See p.6, p.7, p.8, p.9, p.11, p.13, p.21, p.25, p.236, & p.240.

³² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel, (New York: Continuum, 1980). As elsewhere, we think it better to retain the qualifier 'technical' ('technicienne' in the original French) rather than translating it as 'technological'.

And then, Ellul goes on, there is the explosion of the irrational (pp.9ff), which is *"an omen that we are escaping from our closed world"* (p.9). He invokes the student revolt of 1968 to illustrate this point. Such student revolt, together with those of the black Americans and the hippies (p.10), all contributes to this growth of the irrational which acts as *"the true protest against the 'technical' society"* (p.12, bold type ours).³³ Yet *"they, too, are marked by the absence of a future"* (p.12). The essence of this irrational consists of *"the contradiction between that which exists objectively and the way man lives it, experiences it, and feels it"* (pp.14-15, bold type ours), thus echoing what he has said in *The New Demons*,³⁴ *"this man dives with his head down into every religion and belief"* (p.15). The situation is obvious, *"There's no hope"* (p.14).

The sad youths, according to Ellul, reflect the situation in their sadness, in their crisis of adolescence (pp.15-18). *"The absence of hope is the key...to subsume under a single aspect the moods and behaviour of modern man in general, and of the adolescent who is this same man carried to the flash point, to the explosive and visionary stage."* (p.17)

Then there are the reversals of history, which Ellul branded as *'imposture'* (p.20), which involve *"the transmutation of the original intention into its opposite"* (p.20), like transmuting the struggle for freedom into dictatorship (p.19). And there is the adjacent perversion of values, *"One of the earmarks of this society without hope, of this age of abandonment is that in every walk of life people find themselves characterizing situations by their opposite values"* (p.23). Historically Hitler and Stalin played important roles in this perversion of

³³ As we have just remarked in footnote no. 32, we think it better to retain the qualifier 'technical' ('technicienne' in the original French). Thus we shall modify the quotations from *Hope in Time of Abandonment* throughout this section. We shall indicate such modifications with single inverted commas.

³⁴ See Ellul, *The New Demons*, especially "Epilogue", pp.203-208.

values(p.26). The effects of all these are again obvious, *"the person of this age no longer has a fixed...point of reference whereby to direct his activity and his life...Now the person who can no longer put any credence in values...this person can no longer entertain a hope"* (p.28).

Since words for values are perverted, the death of the word necessarily follows(pp.29ff).³⁵ The word falls into *"an almost total formalism...Its content has no meaning"* (p.29). For Ellul, who has studied propaganda in great detail,³⁶ this phenomenon has certainly *"prepared the way"* (p.30) for the death of the word. *"We are living in a world of glorified words...It is merely a symptom of the language crisis"* (p.30).³⁷ The word *"is entirely dissociated from the person"* (p.31), who is unable to communicate. This not only means solitude, but *"the absence of duration...which brings about man's loss of mastery over the future"* (p.33-p.34). This is accompanied by the crisis of law (p.34).

Adjunct to this death of the word is the triumph of the image(p.33, p.35), which makes up the illusory world, which is no longer the world of man's daily experience(p.35). In this illusive world man *"skips over the real...He dreams, but he no longer hopes"* (p.37). *"To live in the poetic illusion presented to us by...the modern world is to do away with the need for making history"* (p.36).³⁸

³⁵ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, tr. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985, original French edition, 1981).

³⁶ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, tr. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1965, original French edition 1962).

³⁷ Cf. pp.123-124: *"We have created a world in which words proliferate, a world of "news" which tells us nothing...nothing is being said...No definitive word is any longer possible"*

³⁸ Cf. Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, especially pp.112-154.

After this initial perusal of the *"life as lived"* (p.38) and its symptoms in the modern world, Ellul turns to *"deep impressions of man in this twentieth-century society"* (p.38). These, for him, are *"symptoms of sterility"* (p.38) of modern man. He comes up with four major characterizations of the Zeitgeist of this age. These are, namely, the age of magic, of scorn, of suspicion, and of derision.

The age of magic is the main theme Ellul deals with in greater detail in *The New Demons*.³⁹ What is particular here is that he has linked this characterization to the remystification of the future (p.38) due to man's loss of mastery over it (p.34). Already in his analysis of the death of the word he has observed that in *"not being able to count on anything enduring...man is left with a basic insecurity in his social world. Nothing is foreseeable because nothing is clearly determined...One has to manage as best he can with the future unknown...carry out whatever rites are necessary to propitiate the powers of darkness"* (p.35). This turn to magic is also closely associated with the growth of the irrational he has discussed before (p.39, cf. pp.9ff). And this turn bequeaths *"outward signs"* (p.38) *"of the absence of hope"* (p.39) which invariably signal sterility. The regression to magic is for Ellul the refuge man takes when *"faced with a formidable 'technical' system and with relentless structures"* (p.39, bold type ours). It issues in *"the throwback toward the irrational, the absurd modes of behaviour, dependence on the imaginary"* (p.41-p.42). For Ellul, *"these are acts of man without hope...He has now become aware that he cannot construct the future his way, and...he no longer believes in any outside forces or person, the gods or God, who act upon this future and to whom he might appeal to intervene in order to change it or develop it"* (p.42)

Next Ellul discusses the modern age as the age of scorn. According to

³⁹ Ellul, *The New Demons*, pp.122-165.

Ellul man has never been so given to scorn, especially *the scorn of his fellow man*(p.42), in order to "*destroy the other person inwardly...to condemn the other person to complete and final sterility*" (p.43, p.47). For Ellul, scorn is violence transferred to the spiritual realm(p.44). He traced back to colonialism, but more so to Nazism and Stalinism, for its origin and development (pp.45-46). In the end, "*to scorn is to put an end to the other person's hope and to one's hope for the other person...and also to stop his having any hope for himself*" (p.47).

Then Ellul comes to discuss the age of suspicion. He discusses suspicion according to three different points of view propounded by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (pp.48-50). All these viewpoints boil down to destroying the person through a deep suspicion of his or her very self. Thus negating oneself (p.51), these three schools of suspicion (p.50) create "*a trap which is intellectual, spiritual, and social...which forbids all hope, and which freezes us in...sterility*" (p.53). The result is that "*the era of a quiet conscience is closed. The era of a chance to hope is gone, for there is no hope where suspicion is king*" (p.52).

Finally, Ellul comes to examine the age of derision, since "*scorn and suspicion were born together*" (p.54). Again, the finger was first directed towards Leninist-Stalinist-Maoism as the initiator for derision. But derision is not limited to the government. The entire society "*is sinking gradually into this corruption*" (p.56). For Ellul, it involves falsification, vilifying the person (p.55). It admits of no dialogue (p.55), thus it "*leads to silence*" (p.59). Thus man "*brings about his own radical sterilization in contrast to his fecundity in matters of 'technique'*" (p.60, *bold type ours*). For Ellul, this act is theological, "*man masochistically depreciates himself before what has become his God...The system of derision is really an essential aspect of a society in which 'technique' becomes God*" (p.60, *bold type ours*). Moreover, "*this sterilization of man (...not...of his productivity and 'technical' inventiveness) is the major sign of the absence of hope*" (p.61,

bold type ours).

What are the overall effects of all these spiritual characteristics of modern western civilization? Ellul has just pointed out that there will be no *"possibility of a new civilization...in which man might be, or might still become, man"* (p.61). Now he points to the imposture and the disavowal of modern western man. Now, modern man, at heart, rejects *"any real breakthrough"* (p.61). There is *"a two-part drive on the part of 'the modern being'"* (p.61). The first is *"the passion for false explanation, and the rapid, immediate adoption of the fictitious conscience...He accepts all the accusations, provided they bypass his real guilt...covering up his actual responsibility"* (pp.61-62). In fact, his real guilt lies with *"the logic of the 'technical' system "* (p.62, *bold type ours*). The second drive is not *"to receive the consolation, the word of deliverance. Unconsciously he prefers to remain in his agony...because the true consolation would make him face up to the fundamental questions of...his responsibility"* (p.63). For such a person, *"his most cherished secret is that of his own disavowal"* (p.63). More importantly, when modern man *"wants not to be consoled...this is the most deadly poison to hope"* (p.78).

Expectedly Ellul pinpoints the dialectical tension between man and the world he created, which gives rise to man's own disavowal: *"the astonishing inconsistency between the brilliant unfolding of man's 'technical' powers and the whittling down of man himself to the point of self-negation"* (p.65, *bold type ours*). *"By various paths man has created substitutes for himself which progressively are depriving him of his role (and it is the development of 'techniques' to the point of central control)"* (p.64, *bold type ours*), so much so that *"man seeks his own negation in derision, in scorn, in a disavowal of everything that had been his history and his virtue up to now"* (p.65). For Ellul, this disavowal is a crisis of civilization(p.66). This crisis, even if it is not global,

still *"affects the entire western world"* (p.67), and *"there is no dialectic which can comfort us...the absence of hope puts in its appearance no matter what the end"* (p.69). Thus it can be seen how central Ellul's socio-cultural and religious analyses of technique have contributed to his overall socio-cultural analysis of the hopelessness of western civilization. In his constant reference to the determinism, the closedness, and the absurdity resulting from the advance of modern technique and technical system, it can be said that technical closedness is for Ellul the cultural-historical reality which gives rise to man's self-disavowal and his sense of hopelessness.

At this point we must reiterate our two main criticisms of Ellul's socio-cultural analysis of technique, namely, that it suffers from an inadequate foundational theological understanding of power, and that Ellul's exclusive attention to it has tended to obscure other cultural domains' influence in a certain cultural milieu. As we have pointed out in Section 5.3.1, this work was written at a period of intense cultural-historical upheavals, especially political and social ones. However, such political and social upheavals do not at all feature in Ellul's socio-cultural analysis of hopelessness. Rather, the analysis is conducted on more abstract socio-psychological and anthropological planes.

However, our cultural-historical observation does not invalidate Ellul's contention that the modern western civilization is one that is without hope. As Ellul himself has stressed, this hopelessness is the cultural *Zeitgeist* the average man has intensively felt. *"After having said that hope is exactly what modern man needs in his anguish, we then said that hope is the crucial lack in our western society"* (p.86). Yet the import of a political hopelessness is very different from a hopelessness instilled by a technical encroachment of the world. This fundamental difference would not only affect the theological interpretation one is going to lay on top of the socio-cultural analysis, but would also affect the

normative theo-cultural action one is going to take to address this cultural-historical milieu. One wonders whether, in the light of a hopelessness instilled mainly by political upheavals, one should not devote more attention to a theo-cultural analysis of the dominant political impasse and its concomitant political ideologies and institutions, and suggest normative theo-cultural actions accordingly. If so, the ensuing theological interpretation may not look the same as the one we are about to examine now.

5.3.3) Analytic Exposition II - Ellul's Theological Thesis that this is an Age Abandoned by God

On top of this sociology of modern West Ellul has entered onto another plane, to provide a theological interpretation for this cultural-historical hopelessness. This is his theological thesis that the modern West has *"entered upon the age of abandonment, that God has turned away from us and is leaving us to our fate"* (p.71), in response to what man has theologically aimed at in his cultural economy of technique, which is to kill God (pp.102-103). As Ellul himself relates, this conviction *"has come to me after so much research into our society, after so much effort to discern the action of God in our age"* (p.71, bold type ours).

Surely, Ellul does not posit that God *"has...turned away from all"* (p.72), especially not from the life of an individual. What he posits is on the cultural-historical plane, that *"it is from our history, our societies, our cultures, our science, and our politics that God is absent. He is keeping quiet, and has shut himself up in his silence and in his night"* (p.72, bold type ours). Moreover, for Ellul, *"it is not the unbelievers who are keeping God away. It is, on the one hand, a matter of structures. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of Christians and of the Church, who do not know how to be what God expects of*

them" (p.73, *bold type ours*).

Ellul first proceeds to unravel the erroneous theological diagnoses which have contributed to this failure of Christians and the Church to keep God with us. Surely, such diagnoses first arose in response to the development of western civilization in the present age. For Ellul, the reason for their diagnostic errors arises in the first place *"because they have not accepted the fact of this abandonment"* (p.74). According to him the first error is one about man (pp.74-97). The second one is about God (pp.98-130). Such diagnostic errors inevitably affect the conduct of the God-man dialectic, the consequence of which is God's abandonment of the modern world. Signs of such abandonment are then seen most prominently in the Church, where normally the God-man dialectic takes place (pp.131-155).

For Ellul the diagnostic error about man has involved *"all theology since Bultmann and Bonhoeffer"* (p.74). It consists of the idea that *"modern man has become scientific and rational, and has come of age"* (p.74).⁴⁰ For Ellul, the reasons for this notion *"all derive from the theologians themselves. They have their own problems with belief, and they project them, en bloc, onto what they call 'modern man'"* (p.75). Thus both the diagnosis and the therapeutic procedure proposed to address it are false. *"This double error is part of the context of the abandonment"* (p.75, *bold type ours*). In taking this error to task Ellul embarks on reruns and preruns of his socio-cultural analyses of modern man's religious and cultural behaviours. The explosion of the irrational, the age of magicians, of suspicion, etc. all point to the error of this theological diagnosis. This amounts to Ellul using rigorous socio-cultural analysis to refute erroneous theological

⁴⁰ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986, original French edition, 1984), p.155, "the age of science has made us rational, that we have 'come of age'".

statements.

A consequential error that follows from this diagnostic error about man is that theologians have tended to diagnose modern man's fundamental theological problem as a problem of faith, while for Ellul this is in fact one of hope. *"But with regard to helping man and finding an answer to his anguish...it is not the proclamation of the faith which is decisive, but the proclamation of hope" (pp.79-80).* For him, to keep insisting on the problem of faith is not only *"a display of blindness on the part of the Church and of theology" (p.79),* but also *"a second proof of the abandonment in which we find ourselves" (p.79, bold type ours).* Thus Ellul goes on to a detailed discussion of the dialectic of faith and that of hope (pp.84-89). For him the dialectic of hope now has the priority, *"Today it is hope which is called upon to arouse, incite, and induce faith; and to define it...to give it content" (p.89).*

At this point Ellul comes to a most extraordinary theological explanation of the absence of hope among man. For him *"material conditions alone do not explain it" (p.89).* Although we can relate *"this death of hope to a certain number of phenomena in the modern world...they are not causes...not even explanations...for in the last analysis, if man in our time has lost hope, it is because God is silent...The silence of God means the absence of history" (p.89, bold type ours).* Thus Ellul has definitely anchored man's absence of hope in his dialectic with God, which means to anchor this absence in God's absence. This absence of history (pp.89-93), and all other socio-cultural phenomena which Ellul has detailed in *Part I (pp.1-70),* such as the language crisis (pp.29-32, cf.pp.93-96), are for him evidences of God's silence (p.93).⁴¹

Ellul then turns to the diagnostic error about God. Here he takes the

⁴¹ In taking them as signs Ellul in fact appeals to God as the ontological basis or teleological fulfillment of these elements of human culture or civilization.

death-of-God theologies to task. In Ellul's estimation, they are cultural theologies par excellence, *"to the degree in which they exhibit a society where 'technical' absurdity reigns, they can be said to be theologies of the absurd"* (pp.100-101, *bold type ours*), so much so that *"by the fact of their relation to the society, they really constitute an ideology. Since they take their rationale, their criteria of judgment, their root, and their model from a sociological observation, and no longer take a fact of revelation as their base, they have no validity as theology"* (pp.100-101).

Yet although Ellul attacks this diagnosis as unauthentic theology, nevertheless he appreciated that *"it is based on true symptoms wrongly interpreted"* (p.98), since as ideology or cultural theology this diagnosis surely must arise from some actual cultural phenomena. Moreover, *"these 'theologies' also contain a profound truth, for it is indeed a fact that man can kill God"* (pp.101-102), meaning that man can crucify God in His totality in Christ, for in Christ God has put himself *"at man's disposition"* (p.102). But Ellul quickly points out that this does not mean that God is forever bound to impotence like *"the porcelain God of the classic theologians"* (p.102). For Ellul this is again cultural theology, *"a new ruse to justify the titanic political and 'technical' undertaking of man, to whom everything henceforth is permissible...What we have here is a simplifying monism which, in its turn, also excludes hope"* (p.103, *bold type ours*). For Ellul, the human effort to strip God of His power and to crucify Christ anew is precisely killing hope (p.103). Yet in the light of Ellul's understanding of the God-man dialectic, *"God does not play a passive role in this business...He is an active sovereign, the one who has made the decision, who has taken the risk and the gamble on the subject of his relations with man"* (p.104). Therefore, *"when God makes himself nothing, it is still for the sake of unbelieving man. He remains sovereign in so doing..."* (p.105). God's sovereignty means that *"God doesn't cease to be the Almighty when he submits to being nothing"*

(p.105). That means Ellul has definitely situated God's economic posture of impotence in the God-man dialectic, and this can in no way obliterate the transcendental omnipotence and sovereignty of God.

After replying to the cultural theology of the death of God from his analysis of the Old Testament naming of God, Ellul goes on to articulate the true theological problem of our cultural hopelessness in *pp.110-111*:

The theology of the death of God springs from a crisis of faith...and from a language crisis. But those crises are either uninteresting or secondary for modern man, for...the fundamental crisis is that of hope. If from the crisis of faith one could deduce the death of God, the death of hope brings us to an altogether different reality: that of the silence of God...the factual reality of modern man is this death of hope...man is without hope because God is silent.

For Ellul, this silence means the absence of God. In *"this spiritual reality of the absence and the silence of God"* (p.112, *bold type ours*), we are to respond *"to the question which God is putting to us by the very fact of his decision to be absent"* (p.112) For Ellul Tillich's *"dialectical definition of God as hidden and revealed at the same time"* (p.113) has not yet grasped the ultimate severity of God's absence, especially because this absence is intentional and implies an active abandonment. This means that God's silence now is not just part of His usual hiddenness, but the silence of an intentional absence which signifies an intentional abandonment of the world.⁴² The terrible result of this is that *"in the silence and absence of God we are truly orphans."* (p.130) Moreover, the

⁴² Cf. Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, p.81, where it is stated that God's absence as manifested in his silence means "the abandonment of the world".

ultimate possibility of this abandonment arises from the utter transcendence of God, *"We are forced to acknowledge that God might really withdraw without having any reason to return to us"* (p.113). But this abandonment of God is impossible to be swallowed in the light of His economic being and action. If God *"is he who enters into history with and for man, is he who constantly reshapes his action, and even his being, according to the work and the passion of man...then this silence, this absence...are impossible to accept, to tolerate, and to live"* (pp.113-114).

This *"impossible possibility"* (p.114), namely, God's intentional abandonment, is what Ellul tries to tackle in the next section. He first points out *"the radical fear which the Jews had of this eventuality"* (p.114). Thus it seems that the Old Testament opens up this impossible possibility, and that Israel has actually had this experience of the silence of God at the end of the period of the Judges (p.116), and in the intertestamental period (pp.116-117). And then, Jesus' many parables are about the absence of the Father (p.118). It seems to Ellul that *"these parables are also there to tell us that this presence...can be withdrawn; that, after Jesus, as was the case with Israel, there can come a time when nothing more of God is visible or audible"* (p.119, bold type ours). For him, this possibility *"finds its confirmation and its culmination in Jesus' cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"* (p.119) Ellul tries to detect *"the connection between this cry and the possibility of the absence of God"* (p.119). And for him *"it cannot be said that because Jesus was abandoned there can never again be an abandonment, nor a silence, nor an absence of God"* (p.120). *"That Jesus Christ is God-with-us does not at all preclude the abandonment"* (p.129). Rather, *"the cry of Jesus seems to me to bear conclusive and unimpeachable witness to the ultimate possibility of this abandonment"* (p.121, Ellul's own emphasis). For Ellul, *"God abandoned God...a splitting apart of God within God--the possible impossibility"* (p.121, bold type ours). This possible impossibility of God

abandoning God in His Triune Self is the ultimate foundation of the impossible possibility of *"God's silence toward us"* (p.121).

Then Ellul turns on to expound *"The Today of the Silence"* (p.122, *bold type ours*) in the modern cultural milieu. He is quick to point out that the horizon opened up by Jesus Christ means that this present-day silence cannot be seen as punishment (p.123). Rather, in the light of the God-man dialectic, God's silence is caused by his own decision, *"in relation to some decision of man's...If now God is silent, it is not because he rejects but because he is rejected...It is the expression for God, in God, of the judgment which man is pronouncing on God, of man's condemnation of God"* (p.123, *Ellul's own emphasis*). Yet Ellul tends to think that this human condemnation of God is unintentional (p.123), and tends to anchor this unintentional condemnation in man's cultural pursuit of power, *"for he does not enter into a power struggle with man...By the same token, triumphant man in our day has decided to kill God...God, who has let himself be put to death in Christ, withdraws into his discreteness before the absence of love...of filial relations...of trust...of gift...of loyalty...of truth...of authenticity...in this world of absences, which modern man has put together with enthusiasm"* (p.125). For him, this world of absences is *"God's decision in history"* (p.129).

Ellul stresses that this conviction is not his feeling and judgment about the society which he did not like (p.129), but *"the general impression of the mass of the people in the western world"* (p.130). Moreover, *"the man of anguish and despair expresses this abandonment secretly, and in a manner visible only from the outlook of faith"* (p.131, *bold type ours*). But it is not so with the Church. *"It is collectively that we experience God's silence and absence. It is the body of Christians, the churches...who find themselves abandoned"* (pp.125-126). Early on in the preface, Ellul has said, *"The Church, in her confused, grandiose, and childish actions, seemed to me proof that that was indeed the case"* (p.vi)

Ellul then points out *"The Mediocrity of the Church"* (p.132, bold type ours). In his eyes, the Church *"conciliates and collaborates with the world"* (p.133). After enumerating various signs of mediocrity, he finally comes to attribute this mediocrity to the enormity of the spiritual battle Christians have to fight, *"The real trouble is that Christians are burdened beyond human power and capacity"* (p.136). For Ellul, the Church's mediocrity is exhibited in the institution, which shows her conformity to the world, her conformity to *"the sociological rigidity of the organization"* (p.137). Under *"the institutional crunch...sociological fate...The growth and success of our Church institutions...is to me a striking, tragic, and glaring sign of the abandonment in which we have lost our way"* (p.138). In this institutional Church, *"we are quite dry of inspiration in the absence of the Holy Spirit"* (p.139).

This dryness is especially exhibited in the incapacity for evangelization which *"is evidence that God is not speaking"* (p.141). And the ensuing hermeneutical effort *"is the testimonial of our reaction to this silence of God"* (p.143). Implicit in this effort is our assumption that *"it is not for God to speak in this business. It is up to us to make him speak. For his Word we must substitute our hermeneutic of the word...such an attitude...can take place only to the degree in which the abandonment has already happened...The search for a general hermeneutic, of which the hermeneutic of Holy Scripture is a particular case, rests on the silence of God"* (pp.147-148).

Finally, God's abandonment is evident in the Church's conformity to the world, *"if the Church is thus conformed to the world, that is indeed in the measure in which she has been left to herself and all alone by her Lord"* (p.148). Without the presence of the Wholly Other, *"conformity to the world is carried so far today that the Church is purely and simply negated in the interest of giving the world a higher rating"* (p.148). This conformity is carried to the point of

negating the individual for the sake of numbers, of the group, which Kierkegaard attacks so vehemently (pp.149-150). *"They conceive everything, the faith included, only in the plural. It is a sure sign of the abandonment"* (p.150). And this conformity is especially seen in the politicization of the Church (pp.150-152). For Ellul, if conformity is the real point of reference for Christian action, *"what a terrible sign it is of our abandonment"* (p.151). When the Church blesses the world, *"that is only possible to the exact extent to which God himself has turned away from his Church"* (p.153). In doing so, the Church *"renders the world incapable of a critical analysis of what is happening, and so is incapable of making true progress"* (p.154). This again, is *"the very expression of God's silence"* (p.154).

5.3.4) Methodological Evaluation I - the Fundamental Disconnection between Socio-cultural Phenomena and Their Interpretations

Thus is Ellul's theological interpretation of the modern West's socio-cultural hopelessness. We can describe this critical theological interpretation as Ellul's theology of the modern West, which is layered on top of his sociology of the modern West, as we have summarized in Section 5.3.2.

As is evident from our analytical exposition in Section 5.3.2, Ellul does not conduct a systematic socio-cultural analysis of the modern West. As Ellul himself has explained, *"I have tried to present some aspects of 'life as lived.'"* (p.38, cf. p.128) *"We have repeatedly stressed the experience of the individual, the fact that he 'lived' a certain reality in a certain way. We have treated this actual experience as the decisive factor. That is a valid procedure when tracing the path of the loss of hope"* (p.30). In short, the 'evidences' he gives out are symptoms and signs illustrating rather than systematically inferring this lived hopelessness as the cultural Zeitgeist. It is in view of the looseness of this

symptomatic illustration that we raise the question of the correctness of this highly interpretative cultural Zeitgeist of a technique-induced hopelessness.

Furthermore, Ellul's theological thesis that God is silent and absent is not directly inducible from socio-cultural phenomena. Therefore, even if the cultural Zeitgeist of hopelessness does not result from technical closedness but from the political impasse of the time, this does not necessarily invalidate the theological thesis. As we have remarked above (Section 5.2.3), there is no necessary relation between the theological and the socio-cultural theses. As the thing goes, the preceding socio-cultural thesis can admit a number of theological interpretations. That is why Ellul can use the thesis of God's silence to answer and replace the faulty theological interpretation that God is dead.

Therefore, if Ellul has discerned God's silence and absence, such discernment is only possible within a theological perspective. This thesis is in fact a second order theological interpretation layered on top of his socio-cultural analysis. In fact, even the socio-cultural analysis of man's hopelessness is spelt out in a theological context of God-man dialectic in order to allow for the positive possibility of theological interpretations.

Similarly, his further theological thesis that God has abandoned the modern West is not inducible from cultural-historical phenomena. It is not even a derivative from the preceding socio-cultural and theological theses, but a third order theological thesis advanced to explain the second order thesis of God's silence and absence within a God-man dialectical context. Due to God's sovereign freedom in the God-man dialectic, God's abandonment is not an effect inferable from the cultural-historical 'causes' of technical closedness and human hopelessness. Although Ellul thinks that God does respond to man's technical

idolatry and closedness⁴³ by turning away, nevertheless he has stressed this response as God's act out of His sovereign freedom. God abandoned the West, although temporarily, in response to man's attempt to crucify God in his cultural economy of technique. In a sense this conclusion is Ellul's own creative and original theologizing in response to the cultural-historical milieu as he has understood it.

Such is the fundamental theological disconnection between the cultural-historical phenomena and their theological interpretations. It has its source in Ellul's high doctrine of God, which has set a limit to the possibility of inferring theological conclusion from cultural-historical phenomena. This disconnection also makes it difficult for the theological theses to be cultural-historically anchored and verified.

Certainly, different theological theses have different potential for cultural-historical anchoring and verification. Here, in contrast to his theological thesis on western history, namely, that God has intentionally introduced the gospel to the West, the negative character of the two theological theses have made it problematic to anchor them in the cultural-historical scene. Although one may take some cultural-historical disorder or impasse as signifying God's silence and absence, this is the furthest one can go. The problem is how to translate this divine silence into a human cultural hopelessness. This can only be visualized in a God-man dialectical context, in which there is a secret longing for God in the human heart. But since Ellul has already grounded this human hopelessness in the technical closedness of western culture, the divine silence may be viewed as unnecessary or superfluous interpretation, for the technical closedness itself has already carried a theological motive.

⁴³ These themes are latent but fundamental in his *The New Demons*.

Similarly, it is difficult to imagine in what cultural-historical sense we can say that God has abandoned man. It is difficult to deduce cultural-historical phenomena that will result from this abandonment. Thus this third order theological thesis is even more ethereal to be anchored in a cultural-historical scene. The only signs Ellul can go for are the problems of the Church, which for him is the natural place to solicit possible 'evidences' for this abandonment.

5.3.5) Methodological Evaluation II - Discerning God's Action or Inaction in Culture: The Lingering Problem of Cultural Theology in Ellul

But why is Ellul's theological thesis here so negative? Does not the cultural-historical investigation still have any influence on the theological interpretation? Since Ellul tries to overcome this disconnection by situating the socio-cultural analysis in the God-man dialectical context, which can conveniently draw cultural-historical phenomena into its orbit of action as human correlates, investigation of such phenomena has been able to exercise some influence on the choice of theological conclusion, although such influence is not equal to strict inference. Here, we observe that, gloomy cultural-historical phenomena do issue in generally negative theological conclusions. Thus although the cultural-historical theses can admit a number of theological interpretations, they are all basically negative. Ellul has introduced such negative theses to interpret the gloominess. This negativity is especially reinforced in a skeptical cultural-historical climate, in which it is easier to propose God's silence than its opposite, namely, that God speaks. It is difficult to affirm God's presence and action in a gloomy cultural milieu. If no significant word or oracle has burst upon a certain cultural-historical milieu, it is easy for one to take it as signifying God's silence. On the other hand, even if certain word or oracle does burst upon a cultural milieu, it is difficult to conclude that it represents God's Word. One may go as far as maintaining that it addresses only a small group or an individual, not a whole culture. Thus although it is difficult to discern God's silence and inaction in a cultural-historical

scene, it is even more difficult to discern His Word and action in a skeptical and gloomy cultural-historical climate.

Thus these theological theses are fundamentally negative, although they have already been Ellul's most positive replacement for the utterly negative cultural theology of the death of God, and they still harbour a possibility to be overcome in the God-man dialectic. This overcoming of the negativity then constitutes the positive theo-cultural action of hope which Ellul describes in the latter half of the book. It can be said that the negativity of such theses is instigated by the cultural-historical analysis, while their positivity comes from Ellul's theology. To say thus is to say that the problem of cultural theology still lingers on in this critical theological interpretation of Ellul. His theological conclusions are still to some extent influenced by his socio-cultural analysis and the skeptical cultural climate he has been in. In the gloomy cultural milieu Ellul cannot discern God's Word and action. Ellul's understanding of the revelation cannot allow him to transcend such cultural-historical sway on his theological conclusions. This is a serious negativity. It is negative not only because it has landed in negative theological theses. It is negative even if in a different cultural milieu that is triumphant, and a cultural climate that is credulous, such influence may conversely produce a positive theology of culture. For such positive theology of culture is still cultural theology, no more and no less.

5.3.6) Material Evaluation I - the Negativity and Invalidity of God's Absence from the Modern West

Therefore, when we come to gauge the validity and value of Ellul's critical theological interpretations, we must go for the material problems in his theological understanding. This is not to deny our precedent criticism of cultural theology, but to investigate how an inadequate theological understanding has opened the door to cultural-historical swaying on theological formulations. Here,

we immediately observe Ellul's inclination to draw out negative theological conclusions from his particular doctrine of God. His understanding of the transcendental distance between the Wholly Other God and man is the theological source which translates into an easy speculation of God's absence.

From a dogmatic perspective, we can easily see that it is admissible to conceive God as being silent in certain time and place. As God's Word is inseparable from His deed this silence signifies God's inaction, although it must also be borne in mind that God is the God of the Word and that such periods of silence serve as prelude to the proclamation of His Word. Surely, this divine silence is much more acceptable than the faulty theological interpretation of God's death in making sense of the cultural milieu. However, from a dogmatic perspective, we also observe that Ellul has unnecessarily deduced that God's silence implies His absence and His intentional abandonment of man. Theologically speaking, it is not at all evident that this silence must be taken to mean that God has turned away from man and even abandoned him, albeit temporarily.⁴⁴ These unfortunate deductions have become the source of problems in Ellul's whole theological interpretation.

From an incarnational perspective, it must be vigorously contended whether God can really be absent, and abandon the world. Although Ellul has taken care to consider the thesis from a biblical and christological perspective, his conclusion is that the Old Testament and Christ's example not only provided us with an example, but the very possibility of God's absence and abandonment of man. Moreover, he has drawn from his understanding of the cross that this abandonment finds its ultimate possibility in the act of God abandoning God. And though he understands that the salvific substitution of Christ has done away

⁴⁴ See, for example, another theological exposition of the silence of God in Helmut Thielicke, *A Thielicke Trilogy*, tr. G. W. Bromiley and C. C. Barber, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, reprint, 1980; first published 1958 & 1962), pp.116-127.

with a final abandonment of man by God, he still retains the possibility that God can be absent and abandon man in history, in a cultural milieu.

5.3.6.1) Understanding God's Presence and Criticizing Ellul's Thesis of God's Absence in the Light of Christ's Incarnation

We have already said that we do not dispute the theological validity of Ellul's thesis that God is silent and inactive in a cultural milieu. The Old Testament evidence and christological parables he invokes certainly establish this possibility. However, as to the possibility of God's absence and abandonment, the problem is not so simple. Firstly, we must define what kind of absence Ellul has in mind. For God as God Who is free in space and time His presence and absence do not take on the same meaning as our earthly counterparts. Certainly, Ellul does not mean that God is providentially absent from His creation.⁴⁵ If so, the creation would have ceased to exist. God as God the Creator is everywhere and hidden. Both His ubiquity and His hiddenness are His freedom as God the Creator. In His ubiquity He is forever present to His creation in providential relations. Yet such providential relational presence is not so close that God loses His identity as the Creator. The doctrine of creation is essential in spelling out this providential presence and yet preventing it from collapsing into some kind of pantheism. Moreover, His hiddenness, which arises from God the Creator's transcendental distance from His creation, similarly guards against any pantheistic understanding of this providential presence.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ As we have mentioned in our Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.4), Ellul harbours a Hebraic understanding that God creates continually. See his *The Theological Foundation of Law*, tr. Marguerite Wieser, (New York: Seabury, 1969, first published 1960, original French edition 1946), p.65.

⁴⁶ This form of God's presence and companionship with man is epitomized in such Old Testament passages as Psalm 139:5-12. In the light of this passage the presence of God must foremostly be understood as a personal and relational presence. It is in the light of this personal character, and in the light of God's later incarnation in Christ, which makes explicit or visible this

But a more vigorous type of God's presence is found in His revelation. In revelation God is spatially and temporally present through His Word. And the most extraordinary form of this type of revelational presence (the presence of God's Word in our midst) is that God in His incarnation in Jesus Christ is physically or bodily present in our space time world. God as the incarnate Son is revealed in certain places at certain times in human history (locally and temporarily). In fact, it is only in this incarnational presence that we can look backward and forward to speak of God's providential presence⁴⁷ and His bodily absence. It is in the light of this incarnational presence of the Son, that we appreciate God the Father's providential presence for Him and for us (Mt. 6.24-34). Moreover, after the coming of Christ, even God's absence must be understood in him. Therefore, it is in the light of the bodily ascension of Christ, that we can speak of God's bodily absence from the world, before His coming again in an eschatological presence that consummates his bodily presence.

But then we must also go on to speak of the spiritual presence of God the Spirit after Christ's bodily absence. In the light of Pentecost it is precisely through the bodily ascension of the Son that the Holy Spirit comes to the world (Acts Chapter 1-2, especially 1.5, 2.4). This spiritual presence is primarily a personal presence, in which God the Spirit comes to dwell powerfully in the heart of the faithful. However, it must be recognized that this spiritual presence is also a socio-cultural presence, inasmuch as Christ's personal presence is also a socio-cultural presence. The personal presence of the Spirit in the life of individual persons is likewise translated into a socio-cultural presence of God in the world, which is a continuation of the presence of Christ in the world after His

hidden presence of God, that we can definitively expunge any trace of a pantheistic understanding of God derived from the notion of His omnipresence.

⁴⁷ See the previous footnote no. 45.

bodily ascension.⁴⁸

It is in terms of this spiritual presence that we can consider the possibility of a spiritual absence as suggested by Ellul. As he does not posit that God has turned away from the life of an individual (p.72), what he refers to is God's spiritual absence from the culture-historical scene (p.72), i.e., a socio-cultural absence. But it is this notion of the socio-cultural absence of God that we must examine in more detail.

5.3.6.2) *The Theological Question of God's Presence and Absence in the World*

What Ellul has in mind in fact raises the whole question of the kind of presence God has incarnated in the modern world. He theorizes that, since the socio-cultural structures under the sway of technique have become closed, and the behaviour of Christians there more and more mediocre and desperate, God has withdrawn His presence from the modern world (pp.72-73), in response to man's attempt to crucify God in his cultural economy of technique. This is indeed a rather simple and straightforward cultural theology of culture! The absence of God is conceived in a very simple manner. God has turned Himself away, and that is it.

However, Ellul does not seem to be aware of what he has said. Can God turn away that easily, just like any man has turned away? To say that is to conceive God's absence in our earthly spatial and temporal terms. While God in His incarnation is really present in spatial and temporal terms, does it mean that His absence can be conceived similarly? What kind of spiritual reality is it to say that God is absent?

⁴⁸ See, for instance, the incident recorded in Acts 19:23-41.

5.3.6.3) The Absolute Significance of Christ's Incarnation for Understanding God's Presence and Absence

To say that God is now 'absent' is to overlook the absolute significance of Christ's incarnational presence in the world. For that is not just a fleeting presence of God in history, which would have evaporated as soon as He has bodily ascended into heaven. It is simply Immanuel, God with us. Therefore, Christ's incarnational presence is not just one extra mode of God's presence. It is in fact God's presence par excellence, the most intense mode of God's presence in the world. That is why God's eschatological consummation is also in that mode.

Therefore, the incarnation is the one absolute vantage point to consider God's presence and absence. The purpose of the incarnation is precisely to bring God's presence intensively into the world, rather than to evacuate it. Therefore, even though we can speak of Christ's bodily absence in similar spatial and temporal terms, the purpose of this bodily absence is surely not negative. Firstly, the incarnate Christ has to ascend bodily in order to prepare a place for us in heaven (Jn. 14.2-3). Christ's incarnation is to bring God's space and time into the world, and to take human space and time into God.

5.3.6.4) Incarnational Presence as Trinitarian Presence

- Bracketing Human History within God's Intensive Presence

Secondly, it is precisely in response to Christ's bodily ascension that God sends His Spirit to be with us as the Comforter (Jn. 14.16-17). This powerfully reveals that Christ's incarnational presence is essentially God's trinitarian presence in the world, which continues up to the present day. In this trinitarian presence, the bodily absence of the Son does not mean the absence of the entire Godhead. Rather, as the sending of the Holy Spirit shows, Christ's bodily

absence in fact means God's intensive presence in the Holy Spirit. In the light of the Trinitarian perichoresis, this presence of the Spirit of the Son means that Christ is still intensively present in the world even after he has bodily ascended. What is more, the promise of Christ's bodily return to consummate His eschatological presence means that the present world is precisely bracketed by this trinitarian-incarnational presence of God. Therefore, any speculation of God's absence outside this incarnation amounts to natural theology.

As we have already pointed out, Ellul's speculation is precisely spelt out within his radical understanding of God as the Wholly Other. This radical understanding has been conducive to conceiving God's presence and activity and man's cultural-historical development in an antithetical manner. To the extent that this radical understanding has not been transformed by God's self-revelation as the Trinitarian-incarnational God, it imposes a certain logic on the God-man dialectic, which cannot transcend the impact of human cultural activities, and is rendered wide open to speculations of cultural theology.

Reinforced by a strong doctrine of the Fall, human cultural activities are speculated to have resulted in the alienation between God and man. This relational distancing or alienation between God and man, if stretched to its limit, would give rise to the speculation of God's death. Conversely, there is a logic that such a speculation be proposed to allow man the ontological space to develop his culture and power. In this light, Ellul should certainly be adamant in his insistence on the sovereign freedom of God to assert Himself. Moreover, his cultural-historical realism also allows him to re-evaluate the cultural-historical development of man's power in a negative light. That is why he substitutes the notion of God's death with his alternative notion of God's intentional turning away and absence from the world. However, it must be recognized that his theological speculation has fundamentally the same structure as the one he replaced. They are both natural or cultural theologies of culture. Neither is

formed by God's self-revelation as the Trinitarian-incarnational God.

5.3.6.5) Forms of God's Trinitarian-incarnational Presence in our History and Culture - our World as a World in Christ

In a Trinitarian-incarnational understanding, God has precisely instituted His trinitarian presence as the true horizon or space for man to develop his power and culture in freedom. To the extent that God's incarnation is His most intensive presence, its impact is continually felt in history. And to the extent that it is an event in history, it cannot be cultural-historically absent again and be completely eradicated. This continuation is certainly encapsulated in the form of cultural traditions and institutions, among which the Church is certainly one. Thus, unless it can be demonstrated that the mediocre Church is no longer the Church and does not any longer bear the truths and values of Christ, it cannot be said that Christ's incarnational presence no longer continues in her.

To put it in another way, to the extent that the present world is bracketed by the Trinitarian-incarnational presence of God, we can say that the world is now in Christ.⁴⁹ To say thus would help us towards the difficult task of

⁴⁹ Thus it cannot be said that the West is post-Christian in a theo-cultural sense. Ellul's insistence on this as a cultural-historical thesis has revealed that he has been unable to grasp the priority of the theological dimension over the cultural-historical dimension of reality. Although in response to Barth's sharp reply that "there could not be a post-Christian era because Jesus Christ has certainly come and is the always contemporary Lord of this world and its history" (Ellul, *The New Demons*, p.23), Ellul has conceded the theological dimension of reality (ibid., p.23), he has stayed on the cultural-historical plane and characterized the reality of the West accordingly. This amounts to paying only lip service to the priority of the theological dimension of reality while avoiding its implications for understanding the cultural-historical scene in a deeper way. This in fact has caused him more than once to relapse into taking the characterization as theological. "We have not ceased to be products of the Christian era, but we have managed to reject what is specifically Christian in this product and retain only its psychic aspect...Post-Christian society, therefore, is not simply a society which followed upon Christendom. It is a society which is no longer Christian" (ibid., pp.24-25, bold type ours). To avoid this recantation and to be true to his theological concession to Barth Ellul should simply characterize the contemporary West as "post-Christendom".

articulating the form of Christ's presence in the world after His bodily ascension. Although Christ's bodily ascension has now separated Him physically from us, the christonomic history and tradition that He inaugurated in the world, and the Holy Spirit that He sent to continue His work, would not render God and His truth to be absent again from the world.⁵⁰ If God has intended to present Himself fully to the world in Christ, all His actions, including His action of bodily absence, are precisely actions to bring His presence more fully to the world.

Furthermore, we cannot say that the world is now without God's Word and Spirit. The incarnation has brought God's Word and Sacrament to our midst, and the Word and the Sacrament are to continue Christ's presence in our midst. To the extent that the Holy Spirit is sent to continue, or indeed deepen Christ's presence in the world, neither can God withdraw His Spirit after Christ's ascension (see David's prayer in Ps. 53). As Ellul agrees, the Holy Spirit continues to work in the hearts of individuals. However, He also sustains and revitalizes the truths and values of Christ in cultural traditions and institutions through such individuals. At most we can only speak cultural-historically of the silence and inaction of the Spirit, which would certainly land the formal presence of the truths and values of Christ in culture into a crisis of vitality and existence. But this is only possible if the Holy Spirit does not even work in the hearts of individuals. This even Ellul dares not assert. And to speculate more than this silence or inaction is perilous, and is against the spirit of the gospel of incarnation. It is in fact also against Ellul's own strong understanding of the transcendence, and therefore the inscrutability, of God.

⁵⁰ Our opinion is that the form of Christ's presence in the world can also be investigated in the light of Barth's three-fold doctrine of the Word of God, so that we can similarly speak of the three-fold form of Christ's presence, namely, in the historical Christ, in the witness of the Scripture to Christ, and in the church's proclamation and actual imitation of Christ.

For us, what can be scrutinized of God can only be scrutinized in Christ. Thus it can be said that presence of God in cultural traditions and institutions must also be qualified as a trinitarian-incarnational presence. It includes the incarnation of the Son's truths and values. This incarnation consists of the formal presence of Christ's truths and values, as well as the material presence of the Spirit's action to revitalize them.

5.3.7) Material Evaluation II - The Glaring Biblical Impossibility of God's

Abandonment of Man

After this discussion of God's presence, we need to examine Ellul's more crucial notion that God has abandoned the modern West. If the incarnation has revealed God's will to be fully present with man, it is simply unthinkable that God should again abandon man. The biblical and christological testimonies also witness against this *"impossible possibility"* (p.114).

Firstly, Ellul has overlooked the overwhelming biblical evidences on God's basic attitude against forsaking⁵¹ man. Besides verses that are used in secular contexts, the bulk of the Old Testament verses concerning the act of forsaking has to do, when used in a God-man relational context, with man forsaking God and His covenant or commandments (e.g. Deut. 28.20, 29.25)

⁵¹ The English Bible uses the word 'forsake' rather than 'abandon' to translate a number of Hebraic and Greek words which have to do with the act of forsaking or abandonment in various contexts. In Ellul's original French, he uses the verb 'abandonner', and 'déréliction' (characteristically in 'temps de la déréliction' and 'monde de la déréliction') and 'abandon' for the noun. Similar to his pair of concepts, namely, techno-cultural closedness and theo-cultural hopelessness, here Ellul may be using the much more intensive 'déréliction' to denote the subjective state man experience in the wake of God's 'abandon'. See Ellul, *L'espérance oubliée*, pp.75-147. On the other hand, we observe that other theologians have also been accustomed to use both terms interchangeably. See Helmut Thielicke, *A Thielicke Trilogy*, pp.173-182; and Gérard Rossé, *The Cry of Jesus on the Cross: A Biblical and Theological Study*, (New York: Paulist, 1987), especially pp.90, 110, 135. However, since the concept is fundamentally a biblical one, our investigation here will be on Ellul's understanding of the biblical concept rather than on the fine subtlety of his French renderings.

rather than the other way round. And the much smaller number of verses that have to do with the idea of God forsaking man essentially belong to two groups. The first group have to do with God's promises (sometimes conditional) not to forsake man (e.g. Deut. 31.6, 31.8; Is. 41.17, 42.16). The second group have to do with God's threats to forsake man if certain undesirable conditions are fulfilled (e.g. Deut. 31.17). Yet precisely as threats it must be recognized that these had never been carried out, especially for those threats signaling an eternal abandonment. Rather, after historical calamities had befallen on the Israelite people, signifying that such threats had been carried out, God's promise of a future salvation and restoration always broke through (e.g. Jer. 31.1-14). Therefore, these threats always became the prelude to God's reaffirmation of his covenantal faithfulness to His people (e.g. Jer. 31.23-37). Thus although the Old Testament witness does formally speak of the possibility of God's abandonment, yet its main thrust is in fact against its realization. And as we have pointed out, there is a huge difference between God's silence and His abandonment. Thus to say that Israel had time and again experienced God's silence does not at all mean God's abandonment, which God is not really inclined to do.

Secondly, it is a gross hermeneutical mistake for Ellul to think that Christ's parousia parables point beyond the absence of the Son to the "*absence*" (p.118) and "*turning away*" (p.119) of the Father. Except for the parable of the wicked husbandmen (Mt. 21.33-46, Lk. 20.9-19), all the other parousia parables are definitely about the bodily absence of the Son or His parousia.⁵² It is only in the context of the incarnation that such parables can be so literal about the bodily absence and parousia of the Son. However, this does not mean that

⁵² They are the parable of the coming of the flood (Mt. 24.37-44, Lk. 17.26-36 & 12.39-40), the parable of the faithful and wicked servants (Mt. 24.45-51), the parable of the ten virgins (Mt. 25.1-13), the parable of the talents (Mt. 25.14-30, Mk. 13.34, Lk. 19.11-27), the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25.31-46), while the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt. 22.1-14, Lk. 14.15-24) relates what would happen in the eschaton and does not speak directly about the return of the Son.

they can signify similar absence of the Father. Thus for the parable of the wicked husbandmen, although the absence of the father is certainly integral to the parable, it must be recognized that this absence should not be taken literally, and certainly not in a bodily sense. In the parabolic genre, this parabolic absence is there simply to bring out other parabolic points.

5.3.8) Material Evaluation III - The Fundamental Christological Impossibility of God's Abandonment of Man

Yet Ellul's contention of God's abandonment of man hinges on God's abandonment of Christ on the cross. For him *"it cannot be said that because Jesus was abandoned there can never again be an abandonment, nor a silence, nor an absence of God."* (p.120) For Ellul, *"that seems to me quite theoretical...in our earthly lives we are still called individually, as a Church, and collectively to cross spiritual deserts, periods of life or epochs of history in which God abandons man to his folly and nothingness. Hence the cry of Jesus seems to me to bear conclusive and unimpeachable witness to the ultimate possibility of this abandonment"* (pp.120-121, bold type ours) in our cultural-historical epochs.

Certainly, in his universalistic understanding, Ellul does not totally deny the soteriological import of God's abandonment of Christ on the cross. Thus he is quick to point out that this *"impossible possibility"* (p.114, bold type ours) is not *"in the ultimate, total and limitless manner, in the completely inaccessible depth...there never will be any question of a final silence, a final abandonment"* (p.121). He is well aware that *"since Christ was himself abandoned in that way, no one is similarly abandoned...because God so loved mankind, he abandoned himself, canceled himself out for man, and therefore no one can any longer get away from that love"* (p.121). For him, *"the history of mankind never ends on the great pause of an absence of God"* (p.121). But he is also aware of *"the limits of*

these spiritual and theological truths" (p.121), so much so that "God's silence is embraced within a history already recapitulated in Christ. Like the abandonment, it can only be temporary and penultimate" (pp.121-122). In short, what Ellul conceives is not an ultimate abandonment by God, but a temporary silence of God that is experienced in a cultural-historical epoch as a theo-cultural hopelessness and a theological abandonment.

5.3.8.1) Ellul's Subjective Cultural Theologizing

It is sad to see this theological interpretation as being so subjective and mistaken. Theorizing as Ellul does, this theological interpretation in fact drives a deep wedge between the temporal and the eternal, the historical and the eschatological. It is in fact saying that Christ's once and for all vicarious atonement is only good for the eternal and the eschatological, while for the temporal and the historical there is no once and for all obliteration of the possibility of God's abandonment of man! What he has said (like "*periods...in which God abandons man*") not only sounds circular, it is in fact spelt out under the sway of his theo-cultural experience or observations of "*spiritual deserts*" etc. This subjective theology dismisses sound theological understanding as "*theoretical*", and goes for using biblical and christological example to "*bear...witness*" to this untenable theo-cultural proposition.

5.3.8.2) The Cross without the Resurrection

Theologically speaking, this wedge between the temporal and the eternal, the historical and the eschatological, can be traced back to Ellul's omission of the resurrection in his discussion of God's abandonment of Christ on the cross. This is not some minor negligence which can be redressed later. It is a serious mistake in theologizing not to consider the impact of Christ's resurrection on His

crucifixion. What is so disastrous is that Ellul simply works backward from the cry of dereliction to posit that "*God abandoned God...a splitting apart of God within God--the possible impossibility. From that time on we know the possibility of God's silence toward us*" (p.121, bold type ours). And since Ellul does not distinguish God's silence from His absence and abandonment, this means that the possibility of God's abandonment of man is hinged on the "possible impossibility" of God's abandonment of God on the cross (p.121). The result is that the crucifixion becomes the dominant locus for Ellul to understand the God-man dialectic. This effectively means that the present world still lives under the shadow of the cross.

5.3.8.3) *The Impossibility of God's Self-abandonment Made Possible in the Incarnation*

But has "*the possible impossibility*" really turned into a reality of "*a splitting apart of God within God*"? In the light of the resurrection the theologizing would be totally different. In the resurrection God in Jesus Christ was revealed as the fully trinitarian God. In this light, "God abandoned God" on the cross is an anti-trinitarian scenario made possible only for the sake of atonement. This can happen only because of God's love for man and the world. Thus it is the incarnational love which made possible God's abandonment of God. "*God abandoned God*" became, as Ellul has put it so aptly, "*the possible impossibility*" (p.121)⁵³. It is an impossibility because God as God and as the truly trinitarian God of loving relations cannot allow this anti-trinitarian self-abandonment. And it has become possible not because God has chosen not to be

⁵³ We are not completely sure why Ellul characterizes God's self-abandonment in this way. The characterization is odd and seems to be an exact opposite of his characterization of God's abandonment of man, namely, an impossible possibility. Therefore, our ensuing discussion is our own theologizing utilizing this characterization. It does not represent an emendation of what Ellul wants to mean. See Ellul, *La Espérance oubliée*, p.117.

God, but because His great love for man has prompted Him to make it possible in the Son's incarnation as man, so that Christ as truly man could really bear all the sins of man and receive the curse of the Father for man. Thus this making possible is one aspect of the mystery of the incarnation.

5.3.8.4) *Christ's Affirmation of Trinitarian Relations on the Cross* - *The Unreality of God's Self-abandonment*

However, it is also in the resurrection of Christ, that this "*possible impossibility*" of God's self-abandonment has been overcome by God's truly trinitarian logic of non-abandonment of His own Son, so that this impossibility never becomes a reality! In fact, this overcoming of God's abandonment of His own Son has already started on the cross. No doubt that the experience of Christ on the cross was one of abandonment. But it is also true that Christ as man, in His obedience to God the Father, has accepted this abandonment for man's sake.⁵⁴ For Christ, as God's beloved Son, did not need to bear it. That is why, after experiencing this abandonment, He could still say in the affirmative, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." (Lk. 23.46), and gave up His Spirit (Jn. 19.30). In trinitarian logic it is an impossibility for the Father to abandon His Son even as man, and Christ's commending His Spirit to the Father certainly would not allow His Father to realize this impossibility. Because in trinitarian logic, the Son's Spirit⁵⁵ is also the Father's Spirit, therefore when

⁵⁴ Ellul, in another article studying the cry of abandonment of Christ, has a much better grasp of the vicarious nature of this cry. It is tragic that he has not applied this theological understanding to the problem of God's abandonment in the present work. See Jacques Ellul, "Mon Dieu mon Dieu pourquoi m'as-tu abandonné?", *Réforme*, whole no. 1148 (18 March, 1967), p.5, "...Jésus devienne lui-même malédiction, à notre place".

⁵⁵ Here we are taking the word 'spirit' (Greek, *pneuma*) to mean, not just the human spirit or soul (Greek, *psyche*), but the very Spirit of God Who has indwelt in the Son in His earthly existence. See "Spirit" in Colin Brown (ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1975-78), vol.3, pp.693-694, "At one end of *pneuma*'s spectrum of meaning it denotes the human spirit, or perhaps better, man in so far as

Christ commended His Spirit to the Father, God reasserted His reality as the trinitarian God, even on the cross!

5.3.8.5) *Christ's Absorption of God's Wrath on the Cross*

- God's Possibility of Abandoning Man Rendered Impossible

Moreover, in this commending or giving up of His Spirit, Christ not only reaffirmed His relationship with the Father and overcame the self-abandonment of God, but as man he has also overcome the rift between God and man, and reaffirmed the God-man dialectic. If the mystery of the Trinity means that the "*possible impossibility*" of God's self-abandonment is never realized and the Trinity reaffirms itself, then this mystery also joins with the mystery of the incarnation to obliterate once for all God's possibility of abandoning man, so that this possibility now becomes an "*impossible possibility*". For in the cry of dereliction Christ in his vicarious humanity has stood in our place to receive God's full wrath on man, and His abandonment of man. Indeed, in the light of the incarnation the very moment of abandonment was the very moment of non-abandonment. The cry in fact showed that Christ was really Immanuel, God with us, even when he was on the cross. For although in the event of the cross the whole humanity rejected God, yet it was still grasped by the presence of God in the man Jesus. Although it appeared superficially that God was absent in the cry

he belongs to the spiritual realm and interacts with the spiritual realm...Thus the spirit of man is that aspect of man through which God most immediately encounters him(...), that dimension of the whole man wherein and whereby he is most immediately open and responsive to God(...), that area of human awareness most sensitive to matters of the spiritual realm(...). Often in talk about this area of encounter, it is not clear whether the language refers to the spirit of man, or to a particular force that he experiences through this dimension of his being, or to a spirit or power from without. Hence, the ambiguity of several passages..." (bold type ours). Here, it is not clear why the author of this article has not counted Lk. 23.46 as one of these ambiguous cases, in which the reference is most likely to the Spirit God bestowed on Christ when He began His earthly ministry (Lk. 3.21-22). He simply thinks that the spirit in Lk. 23.46 refers to the human spirit, "So too death as a giving up the spirit (Mt. 27.50; Lk. 23.46; Acts 7.59) is to be interpreted not so much as the release of the ghost from the machine, but in terms rather of the physical body ceasing to be the embodiment of the whole man." (p.694).

of dereliction, leading us to the notion of His abandonment, in fact in that very cry there was the veiled presence of God in the man Jesus. His cry was in fact God crying to God on behalf of man. Moreover, this presence of God, though veiled, was nonetheless a bodily and intensive presence. Thus the cross becomes a salvific event in which God's abandonment of His own Son, the God-man, becomes precisely an act of God's solidarity with man.

5.3.8.6) The Reality of God's Non-abandonment of God and Man in the Resurrection

Then, in the resurrection, God's non-abandonment of God and Man was fully manifested. The resurrection consummated God's non-abandonment of Christ even in hell (Acts 2.27,31). In the resurrection "*God abandoned God*" has never become a reality, for it has reaffirmed the trinitarian reality of God. At the same time, Christ coming back to life in his body clearly shows that God has not abandoned this God-man. It is precisely in this non-abandonment of God that God also cannot abandon man. The trinitarian reality has overcome the possible impossibility of God's self-abandonment and, more preciously, attained the reality of God's non-abandonment of man. Thus in the light of the resurrection the reality of God's non-abandonment of man is hinged on the reality of God's overcoming of His self-abandonment on the cross. It is in the light of this reality of non-abandonment both of God Himself and man that it is appropriate to speak of God's abandonment of man as an "*impossible possibility*" (p.114). It is a possibility rendered impossible by the reality of God's trinitarian union in the resurrection.

5.3.8.7) God's Relation with Man Secured Forever in Christ

And then Christ was bodily present again in the flesh before His

ascension. Thus the resurrection becomes God's reaffirmation of His bodily and intensive presence with man. And even his ascension does not mean that God's non-abandonment of man has evaporated, for Christ has already pointed out that his ascension is to secure for man an eternal abode with God (Jn. 14.1-3), so that man's relation with God can be secured forever. Looking back from the resurrection and ascension, it can be appreciated that God's relation with man has been secured forever in Christ, in his incarnation and his passion. God no longer threatens to abandon men because of our sins, for Christ in His cry of dereliction, in His cry of commendation, has fully represented and substituted man, because He is fully man. It is in this vicarious humanity of Christ that the later New Testament witness no longer poses God's threat of forsaking man, but affirms God's promise of non-abandonment and faithfulness towards us and our unfaithfulness (Heb. 13.5; 2 Tim. 2.13). If Christ in his vicarious cry of dereliction has already represented and substituted our dereliction, how much more would His resurrection have represented our acceptance by God (cf. Rom. 5.10)?

And more importantly, the resurrection has fully revealed God as the trinitarian God of love, rather than the inscrutable Wholly Other God. Therefore, with the resurrection accomplished, its consequence cannot be relegated to the future, to the end of time. Also we need not fear and speculate that man's cultural-historical endeavours can cancel God's non-abandonment here and now. To say that God can still abandon man temporally in response to our theo-cultural misdemeanours is to deny the efficacy of Christ's vicarious work on the cross, and the triumph of the trinitarian God on the cross and in the resurrection.

5.3.9) Conclusion

After our extended discussions of God's presence and non-abandonment of man in Christ, we must conclude Ellul's critical theology of the modern West

to be basically wrong. The fallacy arises not so much from his socio-cultural analysis, nor from the dialectical relationship between this analysis and theological interpretation, but from his material understanding of theology, especially from his understanding of God, and God's relationship with man and the world in the light of the incarnation.

It is evident that Ellul's particular doctrine of God as the Wholly Other is not incarnational and trinitarian enough, as we have shown in terms of the concepts of God's absence and abandonment it gives rise. This has the strange effect of rendering his Wholly Other God susceptible to cultural-historical swaying in His attitude towards man. The possible theological interpretation Ellul has produced in face of our particular cultural milieu is still negative. It is a tragic irony that Ellul tries to use this still negative interpretation to counteract the dominant negative cultural theology of the West, namely, the death-of-God. It is sad that Ellul has not really probed into this utterly trinitarian dynamic of the whole atonement event. This means that he has not ^{allowed} let this revelatory atonement to reform his understanding of God as the Wholly Other. In his transcendental understanding of God, God's abandonment of man is still possible in a certain cultural milieu. This is, to say the least, unsettling, for it conceives that God can do something to man beyond the paradigm of the incarnation, *"In the silence and absence of God we are truly orphans. We are forced to acknowledge that God might really withdraw without having any reason to return to us"*(p.113) Such a Wholly Other God of abandonment is inscrutable as well as terrible.

In conclusion, what Ellul has experienced, namely, a theo-cultural hopelessness, can at most be interpreted as a temporary silence of God, and no more. To conceive it further as God's absence and abandonment is a contradiction of the revelation of God in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, and a contradiction that is heavily influenced by the cultural-historical experience of Ellul.

Chapter 6) Summary and Conclusion

6.1) Introduction

Our investigation of Ellul's theology of culture must now draw to a close. Within the relatively small compass of a Ph.D. thesis, it is in fact difficult to do justice to as prolific and diverse^a a thinker ~~such~~ as Ellul. This difficulty is further increased when we examine his works. Partly for the intrinsic complexity of the topics, and partly for his particular 'Ellusive' style of writing, it is found time and again that unless his writings are examined in detail and thoroughly discussed, one would only end up in rather shallow conclusions, and be unable to unravel the deeper structure and problems of his thought. Moreover, Ellul's diverse studies have shown us that there can be many different genres or types of theology of culture, so much so that we have to characterize and comment on these different genres, and to develop our typological apparatus along the way. This also stretches our study to its limit. Our study above, we believe, has amply illustrated this state of situation. Thus our investigation of Ellul's theology of culture should be deemed explorative rather than comprehensive, for there remains quite a number of his works that would be both interesting and rewarding if studied from the perspective of a theology of culture.¹ Yet we are convinced that a theology of culture provides the best framework to comprehend Ellul's works, because this perspective can take up his most important theological works, and provides the focus in which both his theological works and his socio-cultural works can cohere.

¹ For example, his work on the triumph of the image over the word in a technological society, namely, *The Humiliation of the Word*, tr. Joyce M. Hanks (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985, original French edition 1981)), and his work on *The Subversion of Christianity*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986, original French edition 1984).

6.2) Ellul's Strong Showing in Normative and Descriptive Theologies of Culture

Thus after preliminary considerations of the field of theology of culture in our Chapter 1, we proceed to examine Ellul's seminal work on *The Theological Foundation of Law* in our Chapter 2. We have shown its significance not only as a theology of the cultural domain of law, but of the whole culture as well. Formally, we have also shown it to be a good example of an economic theology of culture, in which God's economic action constitutes the foundation or framework in which human cultural actions take place. Because this divine foundation is put in place by God's economic action, this theology of law has become a strongly normative one, pointing to normative actions man should take in order to develop the cultural domain of law. For Ellul, this development of law would then provide the framework for the post-war world to formulate a cultural order for its cultural institutions. Thus this theology of law has tremendous normative implications for the whole post-war western civilization, so that we can further characterize it as a normative economic theology of culture. Materially, we have shown the God-man dialectic, which in this case has particularly been manifested as a dialectic of grace, to be the economic dynamic which bequeathed this divine foundation to human law and culture. Methodologically speaking, this God-man dialectic also provides the basis for Ellul's particular dialectical method of bringing together cultural and theological analyses.

Then we go on to examine Ellul's theology of the city in our Chapter 3. We have shown its significance not only as a theology of man's cultural work of the city, but as a symbolic theology of the whole human culture or civilization as well, since the city also constitutes man's cultural horizon. Formally, we have shown it to be Ellul's definitive or descriptive economic theology of culture, in which the whole economic history of God's dialectic with man, and therefore His economic action on man's cultural work as epitomized in the city, has been

set out. In Ellul's narrative exposition of this dialectic with the city as its focus, the sovereignty of God's electing action on the city, and the ensuing centrality of Christ's substitutionary action for the city, are both set out. The result is that Christ's incarnation has made possible a dissociation of man's cultural work from its spiritual power, and an adoption of man's cultural work in its totality. Thus there is the hope that human culture will be recapitulated in the eschatological city of God where man will experience God's full presence. In this light the eschaton has become the true space or horizon for human cultural activities. Materially speaking, Ellul has taken his exposition of the God-man dialectic to a new christological height. Methodologically, his doctrine of the Word of God and the biblical-theological method it gives rise have shown here their profound implications. In this biblical theology of culture, a strongly christological perspective enables him to provide a canonical interpretation of the Scripture, to expound God's action to man and his culture in the whole Scriptural corpus. Yet it must be asked whether such a symbolic theology of culture can be really equal to the task, and this raises the complex problem of applying or extending this definitive symbolic theology of culture to cultural realities outside the bible.

Such is our picture of Ellul's seminal works on the theology of culture. To conclude what we have learned from this prolific and diligent thinker at this point, we recognize, firstly, the prominence of the normative dimension in a theology of culture. In his intense cultural-historical and ethical concern for the post-War civilization, Ellul has spelt out a strongly normative theology of law for the culture as a whole. However, for a truly normative theology of culture to be spelt out, one must also pay attention to the descriptive dimension of a theology of culture, and spell out a definitive theology of culture accordingly. We must do this, for in Christian theology the indicative is prior to the imperative, which means that the prior action of God is the true basis for man's action to take place. It is to his credit that Ellul has also provided us with very good example of such a descriptive economic theology of culture. It is to his credit that he has not

stayed put in some abstract philosophical-theological formulation when spelling out both normative and descriptive theologies of culture. Rather, thanks to the influence of Karl Barth, he has expounded God's concrete actions on human culture in a strongly biblical and christological way, in the framework of the God-man dialectic.

Thus Ellul's work has opened us to the paramount importance of spelling out an economic theology of culture. It is recognized that the dynamic for proper theology to extend into a theology of culture lies with the inherent dynamic of God's revelatory and redemptive economy itself. Thus a faithful exposition of this economy will inevitably include human culture into its orbit of exposition. It will not only enable us to describe God's economic action towards human culture, but will also provide the normative framework for human actions on culture. Moreover, it will also provide a framework for us to critically assess human culture in both whole and part.

6.3) Ellul's Problematic Critical Theologies of Cultural Elements or Domains

Yet when we come to examine his critical theologies of specific cultural elements and specific cultures, we find that the preceding economic theologies of culture have not been applied well, although Ellul has produced an amazing quantity and variety of critical theologies of specific cultures and cultural elements.

This problem of application or extension leads us to a study of Ellul's more diverse works on culture. What we try to examine in our Chapter 4 is a particular genre of theology of culture. This is the critical theo-cultural analysis of specific cultural element or domain, on which Ellul has done a lot of work. It is the first type of his critical theology of culture. Whether Ellul can really apply his descriptive economic theology of culture to produce truly critical theologies of cultural elements or domains is the central question here. In fact, the first

possible example we had recourse to is Ellul's work on law. In trying to spell out a normative theology of law, Ellul has first provided some very critical theo-cultural analysis on law, especially on natural law. However, since this analysis on natural law is situated within a largely normative theology of law, it does not serve as a very good example of this genre.

Methodologically, a full-scoped critical theology of a specific cultural element or domain should consist of cultural-historical analysis of that element or domain, as well as theological meta-analysis or post-reflection entering into critical dialogue with the preceding analysis. In short, the dialectic between cultural and theological analyses has to be carried out thoroughly. Since each cultural element or domain has its unique foundational aspects and thus its unique place in the overall culture, the cultural-historical analysis should be able to tease out such foundational aspects specific to the cultural element or domain. Then the theological meta-analysis should go on to provide theological perspectives on each of these foundational aspects, as well as a theological perspective on the history of the development of the element or domain. However, what we have found in Ellul's critical analyses of technique is that he has materially harboured a persistent theological pre-understanding on a foundational aspect^f technique. This is his general theological pre-understanding of the power aspect of all cultural elements and domains. In the light of this ubiquitous pre-understanding, technique is understood as an autonomous spiritual power whose reality is independent of man's development and manipulation of it.

Yet this theological pre-understanding has not issued in a critical theological analysis of technique. Rather, the analysis of technique remains formally a cultural-historical analysis, although the pre-understanding does influence it in a deep way. However, we have found this influence to be severely negative. It has clouded ^{k3}its delineation and characterization of technique, landing it onto a kind of mythological realism. In this sense it is formally a theo-cultural

analysis, although it is such in a bad methodological sense.

Methodologically speaking, Ellul has been slow to subject his understanding of technique to dogmatic reflection. When subjected to such reflections, his mythological understanding of technique as autonomous power is found to be materially inadequate. Ontologically and axiologically, this mythological analysis of technique is not true to the Christian doctrines of creation and man. It is not noticed that technique's negativity can be checked by the limits of creation itself. Rather, his strong understanding of the Fall has caused him to severely undervalue technique's positivity. Historically and teleologically, this mythological analysis does not take into account the effect God's redemptive economy may have on technique and technology's cultural-historical development. For him, neither technique nor technology has any significance for God's redemptive economy in the world. No theological perspective on the history of the development of technique and technology needs to be explored.

The methodological consequence of this relative lack of dogmatic reflection is that the dialectic between cultural and theological analyses has broken down. Most prominently, Ellul has not really applied or extended his descriptive economic theology of culture, which he has so strenuously expounded, to this theo-cultural analysis of technique.² Thus the analysis remains a cultural analysis, although one which is derived heavily from a dubious theological understanding of power, so much so that it becomes in effect a monistic theological assertion cloaked superficially as a cultural-historical investigation. Thus it becomes

² Although Ellul wrote his descriptive economic theology of culture, i.e., his theology of the city, later than his first work on technique, he has not really applied this descriptive theology of culture to his two later works on technique, namely, *The Technological System*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980, original French edition 1977), and *The Technological Bluff*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990, original French edition 1988).

formally a bad example of a full-scoped critical theo-cultural analysis of a cultural element. And the economic theology of culture, which Ellul has started so well in his works on law and the city, has come to a disturbing quiescence here. Materially speaking, this situation arises from the fact that Ellul has not included technique, especially its cultural-historical development, in the ongoing economic dialectic God has extended to man.

6.4) Ellul's Problematic Critical Theologies of Specific Culture

Next, our study of Ellul's definitive or descriptive theology of culture also opens up the whole question of how to apply or extend this definitive theology of culture to a whole culture. Thus in our Chapter 5 we enter into a study of another genre of Ellul's critical theology of culture, namely, his critical theological interpretation of a whole culture. In this case the culture is the West, which is the culture in which Ellul himself has lived.

Thus we first study Ellul's proper critical theological interpretation of the West in his *The Betrayal of the West*. It is significant as an application or extension of God's economic action in Christ to history. Formally, this is not only a critical theological interpretation of the West, but, more crucially, of her very history. Ellul locates the theological mystery of the West in Paul's Macedonian vision. From that central event, he looks back to the Greco-Roman heritage of the West, and forward to the subsequent cultural-historical development of the West. In the vein of his particular emphasis on the power aspect of culture, he has located the human spirit of the West as a will to power, and the dialectical conflict between God and man in terms of man's cultural-historical pursuit of power. Thus Ellul in fact opens up the history of the West to a whole new dimension of understanding, namely, to theological interpretation. Methodologically, this signifies that theological interpretation can enter into

fruitful dialectic with cultural-historical analysis, allowing revelation to be the clue to the interpretation of a culture and its history.

However, paradigmatically speaking, the dialectic between God and man in his cultural pursuit is conceived by Ellul as one of contradiction. This paradigm arises materially because his cultural concept of dialectic is not sufficiently transformed by an incarnational Christology, so much so that the God-man dialectic is conceived in an unduly voluntaristic and contradictory manner, with man's theological intention under the Fall being always ready to wreck this whole dialectic. Human cultural development under this rubric is always seen to carry an anti-God intention. Methodologically, this signifies that Ellul's own characterization of revelation as dialectical contradiction is still by and large a cultural characterization. It is not sufficiently grounded in the reality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The result is that this critical theology of the western history carries a basically negative tone to the cultural-historical development of the West. It remains largely critical without being able to provide any meaningful theological evaluations and appropriations of Western values. Nor does it provide any normative theo-cultural suggestions for the West to uphold or develop her values.

In the second part of our Chapter 5 we turn to an important work of Ellul on the West in the late 1960's, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*. Formally this is significant as his most direct and critical theological interpretation of the modern West. The theological interpretation is preceded by Ellul's most macroscopic socio-cultural analysis of the West in the late 1960's. We have shown this analysis to have synthesized his important observations on various elements and domains of modern western culture, including technique, propaganda, politics, law, morality, religion, youth culture, to that day. In this macroscopic analysis, Ellul paints a picture of modern western technical civilization coming to a dead end, in which hopelessness has become its cultural Zeitgeist. Upon this socio-

cultural analysis, Ellul lays another layer of theological interpretation, namely, that this is an age in which God is absent, signifying that it is abandoned by God.

Formally, this critical theological interpretation of the modern West can be taken as a third form of the Word of God which Ellul attempts to expound and proclaim. There is a normative function to this critical theological interpretation. It sets the stage for him to spell out his transcultural theological ethics of hope,³ which would lead to a further theo-cultural ethics of freedom.⁴ The ethics of hope would hopefully open up the modern world once again to the intervention of God. Yet although spelt out in the context of God's economic action in history, this interpretation argues that the economic action of God no longer continues at the moment. Thus this critical theology of culture is ironically anti-economic.

Since methodologically, there is a fundamental disconnection between this theological interpretation and the socio-cultural analysis, it means that the problem of the theological interpretation is a material one which has to do with Ellul's dogmatic understanding. And this material problem has affected his very understanding of God's economy. We have already touched on the unincarnational nature of his understanding of the God-man dialectic above. Here, we further detect that his strong understanding of God as the Wholly Other has been the source of this unincarnational understanding. It has adversely affected his understanding of God's presence and His non-abandonment of man in Christ. Since these theological conclusions are also reached at the end of Ellul's later exposition of the mystery of western history, they have revealed that the unstable

³ Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, tr. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1977), Part IV, pp. 223-306.

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, abridged translation of the original French edition by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1976, original French edition in 3 volumes, vol. 1, 1973, vol. 2, 1975, vol. 3, 1984).

nature of Ellul's conception of the God-man dialectic has arisen from the same source, namely, his transcendental doctrine of God.

Moreover, man's cultural-historical state is seen to have exercised an undue influence on this unincarnational God-man dialectic. This amounts to saying that Ellul's critical theology of culture has not been immune from the danger of cultural theology because its theological pre-understanding has not been thoroughly formed, and therefore protected, by revelation. Methodologically speaking, this means that Ellul's dogmatic pre-understanding has rendered his critical theology of culture vulnerable to cultural-historical swaying, thus nullifying the fundamental disconnection between socio-cultural analysis and its theological interpretation. It also means that this critical theology of culture does not augur well for Ellul's precedent descriptive economic theology of culture, in which God's economic action constitutes the framework in which human cultural actions take place.

Thus Ellul's theological pre-understanding has severely affected his understanding of God's economy, and undermined its relevancy for understanding and criticizing human culture and specific cultural elements or domains. That means the problems in his theology have ramifications in undermining its relevancy and power to give rise to satisfactory critical theologies of culture and cultural elements or domains.

6.5) The Source of Ellul's Problems - The Wholly Other God and Foundational Understandings of Space Time and Relation

To analyze further, the material problem of Ellul's theology of culture boils down into three aspects. The first concerns his understanding of the relational dimension, while the second and third concern the temporal and spatial dimensions, of God's economy. Despite the fact that Ellul has been influenced by

Barth to harbour a christological emphasis, his exposition of the God-man dialectic has shown that this emphasis is not strong enough to transform his theological pre-understanding. Rather, his pre-understanding of God as the Wholly Other is seen to have dominated the God-man dialectic. This understanding has severely undermined the christological centrality of God's dialectic with man. This means that Christ is not always placed at the centre of the dialectic, mediating the relation between God and man. Otherwise such an idea of God's temporary abandonment of man should not even be entertained!

This shows that Ellul's theological pre-understanding of God as the Wholly Other has persisted and caused the God-man dialectic to become a dialectic of dereliction. This temporary nullification of the once-and-for-all vicarious work of Christ is all the more tragic in view of the fact that he himself is highly critical of modern man's attempt to re-crucify Christ.⁵ Ellul's overlooking of the incarnation is particularly manifested in his overlooking of the significance of Christ's vicarious humanity for a theology of culture. He has not really understood that Christ's event as man on the cross has once and for all obliterated the possibility and threat of God's abandonment of man. Nor has he seen that his later exhortation of man's dialectical response of hope towards God⁶ has already been accomplished by Christ the man, whose resurrection has been proof to this accomplishment. Without this vicarious response by Christ as man, what Ellul exhorts Christians to do verges on becoming man's existential work to save himself.

The volatility of Ellul's conception of the God-man dialectic is not very evident in his descriptive theology of culture, for that theology is spelt out in a

⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, tr. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 78-79.

⁶ Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, pp.189-191.

thoroughly canonical and christological manner. It is also imaginable that revelation itself has sufficiently constrained Ellul's theological exposition to a christological direction. It must also be noted that the work has not devoted much attention to the present epoch between Christ's first and second coming. However, for Ellul's critical theologies of culture and cultural elements in the present epoch, revelation does not exercise the same degree of constraint, for by nature they are not spelt out wholly within the biblical confines. Thus they become heavily influenced by his theological pre-understanding, so much so that the God-man dialectic in these theologies becomes volatile, which occasionally leads to speculation of God's exclusion of certain human cultural development from his graceful economy.

This exclusion of certain human cultural development from the God-man dialectic has signified a departure from Ellul's original understanding of the temporal aspect of God's economy. For as we have shown in our Chapter 3, the time axis of God's economic action in the world is characterized as a creation-covenant-parousia axis. This is a time axis conducive to including human culture within the economic action of God. However, Ellul's theological pre-understanding of the Wholly Other God has prevented his critical theologies of culture from being really included into this axis. This signifies a significant departure of his critical theologies of culture from the spirit of his normative theology of law, in which the creation-covenant-parousia axis is really operative in informing the cultural development of law. This departure has meant that Ellul's critical theologies of culture and cultural elements could not achieve theological understandings of their cultural-historical developments, and would certainly not provide normative theo-cultural suggestions for them in the present epoch.

Moreover, this exclusion has also deeply affected Ellul's understanding of the spatial aspect of God's economy. As we have shown in our Chapter 4, Ellul

understands that the divine economy has brought in an eschatological city as the true space for human culture, as the widest horizon in which human cultural activities take place. However, our study of his critical theology of the modern West has also shown that he has not understood that God's economy has also brought His trinitarian presence into the present world. This has the significant effect of relegating the eschatological city, where the trinitarian presence consummates, wholly to the future. This means that this widest horizon is no longer operative for human cultural activities in the present epoch, so much so that it does not feature at all in Ellul's critical theologies of western culture and its technical development. This also explains why his descriptive theology of the city is relatively weak in its critical theological analysis of post-biblical cities, and that there is few normative theo-cultural suggestions for human cities in the present epoch.

6.6) Towards a Trinitarian-incarnational Theology of Culture

Thus we can only conclude that it is crucially important to achieve right theological understanding ^{of} ~~on~~ the economy of God, in order to transcend and transform one's theological pre-understanding. Otherwise it will not be possible to ensure that one's theology of culture can be free from the danger of cultural theology. This means that a cultural theology can only be expunged at the material level, by good solid theological understanding. As the unfortunate example of Ellul has shown, anything less than a fully economic theology of culture would still slide back into the pitfall of cultural theology, which causes its relevancy and power to deal with culture to be greatly diminished. Methodologically, this means that a theologian must be faithful and open to the revelation of God, to allow it to question again and again one's own theological pre-understanding. Here we observe that Ellul harbours a similar view on the interpretation of Scriptures. Instead of thinking that Scriptures provide answers to our questions, he contends that it is God Who poses questions to us in the

Scriptures.⁷ Similarly, one must realize that the paramount hindrance to doing a proper theology of culture that is truly theological lies with oneself, with one's own theological pre-understanding that is not truly theological but is derived from the cultural milieu or some cultural ideologies. Thus rather than assuming the Scriptural witness as some inherently cultural documents which need to be purged of their cultural ideologies, one must stand under the authority of the Bible and be ready to receive the challenge it poses to one's own theological pre-understanding.

And the material principle to achieve right theological understanding lies unambiguously with a thorough Christology with a full understanding of the incarnation. We have seen that even Ellul has not followed Barth completely in this respect, in that his understanding of the God-man dialectic is not thoroughly grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, what we have to do is to expound a fully christological dialectic between God and man, in which Christ not only mediates God's economic action on man and human culture, but also mediates man's response to God in human culture. This human response to God in Christ would then constitute the true foundation for man to engage in cultural activities in freedom. It would answer powerfully the need of a strong normative dimension in a theology of culture. In this way a free theology of culture in the tradition of Barth⁸ can be spelt out,

Moreover, under the impact of this christological God-man dialectic, the temporal and spatial aspects of God's economy would also be transformed. In fact, the creation-covenant-parousia time axis should be characterized anew as a

⁷ Jacques Ellul, "La Bible est un livre de questions; N'y cherchons point des réponses", in P.-P. Kaltenbach (ed.), *La Famille contre les pouvoirs: De Louis XIV à Mitterrand* (Paris: Nouvelle cité, 1985), pp.195-201.

⁸ Robert J. Palma, *Karl Barth's Theology of Culture: The Freedom of Culture for the Praise of God*, (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick, 1983).

creation-incarnation-parousia axis, for the incarnation is indeed pivotal in the time axis stretching from creation to parousia. This re-characterized time axis will be able to allow a more thorough christological understanding of the development of human culture in history, so that it is possible to explore Christ's presence in history more intensively. For example, human rights can be explored as christological rights, rather than as covenantal rights which Ellul has expounded in his work ^{on} of law. Moreover, this more thoroughly christological understanding of time will prevent us from relegating God's action in the world to the future, for the incarnation will constitute the crucial link between creation and parousia. It can bring forth the eschaton powerfully to the present epoch, rather than letting it stay as our remotest future in the furthest horizon. In short, this christologized time axis will be more effective in including human cultural development into the economic action of God.

Lastly, the spatial horizon of God's economy would be similarly transformed, for the incarnation has been instrumental in bringing God's trinitarian presence into our space time world, because Christ's presence is nothing but God's trinitarian presence in the world, and Christ's incarnation is nothing but the incarnation of our trinitarian God. Only in this way can we speak of the eschatological city as the true space for human culture, the horizon in which human cultural activities take place, for this city is the space in which God's trinitarian presence is exhibited fully. This trinitarian presence is in fact the presence of the eschaton in our midst, which would not render the new Jerusalem remote and futuristic from our world.

Therefore, in this time axis and spatial horizon accomplished by Christ in His incarnation, we can be sure that this God is not the Wholly Other God of a transcendental monotheism, nor the transcendent God of abandonment, but the trinitarian God of incarnation. Moreover, we can be sure that He has chosen to be with man in his culture, even in his cultural revolts, till the end of the world.

In this more authentic economic understanding of God's action in the world, in this properly trinitarian-incarnational understanding of His dialectic with man and human culture, we shall have nothing to fear, nothing to despair, but everything to rejoice and to hope. We shall have the freedom and grace to utilize our best cultural treasures, to muster our utmost cultural strengths, to give our utmost free praise to God, and to continue to engage in our cultural activities as a response of freedom and obedience to our gracious trinitarian God of the incarnation. Amen!

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